

# **Looked After Children and Young People in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Absence**

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**I confirm that the word count of this thesis is less than 100,000 words**



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**Background:** Key findings at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 indicate that 2890 children and young people were looked after (LACYP) by the state in Northern Ireland (NI). This is the highest number recorded since 1996. These children and young people are identified by the Department of Health (DH) as one of the most disadvantaged groups in NI, who exhibit a regular pattern of non-attendance at school, and who are likely to experience poorer educational outcomes.

**Aim:** To identify why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among post-primary LACYP, what does this tell us about their educational experiences, and what is known to be helpful or unhelpful in addressing this issue.

**Method:** An exploratory, qualitative approach investigated the school and educational experiences of young people, consisting of three studies involving service providers, young people and mentors. Twenty participants took part in individual interviews which were analysed using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), (Study One and Study Three) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), (Study Two).

**Findings:** The studies revealed difficult experiences young people encountered in the school environment, personal characteristics of young people, parenting style of carers, placement stability and type, all of which contributed to non-attendance. Disciplinary measures used by schools were found to be ineffective in addressing attendance issues. Finally despite the comprehensive legal frameworks in place in NI that govern the care of those looked after by the state, the evidence presented in this thesis suggests the intent of these frameworks is not always in evidence at a grassroots level.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight the need for the care and education systems to work together to facilitate the educational process of those looked after the by state. Some contributing factors are associated with characteristics of young people themselves, many of whom are recovering from trauma. A lack of collaborative, partnership working between authorities compounds the issue of unauthorised absence further and the associated risks.

<b>CCEA</b>	<b>Council for Curriculum, Education and Assessment</b>
<b>CCMS</b>	<b>Council for Catholic Maintained Schools</b>
<b>DE</b>	<b>Department of Education</b>
<b>DfCSF</b>	<b>Department for Children, Schools and Family</b>
<b>DH</b>	<b>Department of Health</b>
<b>DHSSPS</b>	<b>Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</b>
<b>EA</b>	<b>Education Authority</b>
<b>EST</b>	<b>Ecological Systems Theory</b>
<b>HSCT</b>	<b>Health and Social care Trust</b>
<b>IPA</b>	<b>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</b>
<b>LACYP</b>	<b>Looked After Children and Young People</b>
<b>NI</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>
<b>NIAO</b>	<b>Northern Ireland Audit Office</b>
<b>NICE</b>	<b>National Institute of Clinical Excellence</b>
<b>PEP</b>	<b>Personal Education Plan</b>
<b>SEN</b>	<b>Special Educational Needs</b>
<b>SCIE</b>	<b>Social Care Institute for Excellence</b>
<b>TCA</b>	<b>Thematic Content Analysis</b>
<b>UNOCINI</b>	<b>Understanding the Needs of Children in</b>

	<b>Northern Ireland</b>
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## **Chapter 1.0**

### **Introduction to the Thesis**

### **Aims and Objectives**



## **1.1 Overview**

This chapter introduces the issues under investigation in this thesis and provides information on the context and rationale of the research. Poor educational outcomes and low school attendance rates among LACYP (LACYP) in Northern Ireland (NI) are considered, and any known contributing factors. The justification and rationale for the research undertaken is outlined and a brief overview of chapters' two to seven is provided.

## **1.2 Rationale**

The aim of education is to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives (Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), 2007). Education should provide opportunities for individuals to achieve personal fulfilment and wellbeing through living a successful life, contributing to society, the economy and the environment ([www.ccea.uk](http://www.ccea.uk)). Educational achievement is a known predictor of success in adulthood and those who leave school with few or no qualifications can encounter enduring challenges with finances, employment and general life opportunities (Bowman et al. 2015; Friend & Cook, 1990; Gump, 2005; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Willingham, 1974). Research shows regular attendance is linked to positive educational outcomes (Connell et al. 1994; Tangney et al. 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012) but there has been limited investigation into poor or non- attendance, particularly by vulnerable and marginalised groups. LACYP are identified as a disadvantaged group who exhibit a regular pattern of non-attendance at school, and who are likely to experience poorer educational outcomes (Department of Education (DE), 2011). It is within this context that this study is located.

## 1.2 Background

Under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995) the term 'LACYP' (LACYP) refers to children and young people who are looked after by the state. Children and young people aged below 18 years become looked after either on a voluntary basis to assist parents at times of crisis, or as the result of a statutory court order. Key findings from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS, 2016) established that at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, 2890 children and young people were looked after in Northern Ireland (NI)<sup>1</sup>. This is the highest number recorded since the introduction of the Order.

When a child or young person becomes looked after the state acts as a parent to that child or young person in what is termed *corporate parenting* (DHSSPS, 2006, p.31). In NI the relevant local Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) assume responsibility for the safety and welfare of each child and has a duty to safeguard and promote their wellbeing. Each Trust typically has a Corporate Parent Division consisting of teams of social workers with a remit to improve outcomes for those children and young people in their care. Staff will work directly and collaboratively with children or young people to develop an appropriate care plan, provide on-going assessment, offer therapeutic intervention and identify support that can be provided by health or education professionals (Southern Health and Social care Trust (SHSCT), 2010).

There are different types of placement for children and young people cared for by the state; this is determined by the individual needs and circumstances of each child, and by the availability of placement options within each Trust. Some children and young people may become looked after but remain living with their parent(s) with supervision and support from the Trust. Many live with foster parent(s) or in kinship care which is a form of fostering by family members. Others live in residential care settings that include children's homes, specialised units for children with complex needs (such

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<sup>1</sup> Children in care 2015/16 DHSSPSNI <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-care-northern-ireland-201516>

as learning disability and mental health), and secure units for those who are at risk of harm to themselves or others. At the end of March, 2016, the following placement types were recorded for LACYP:

Table 1.1 Placement type of LACYP in NI (DHSSPS, 2016)

<u>Placement Type</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Total</u>
Foster Care	77%	n=2227
Parents	13%	n=375
Residential Care	6%	n=173
Secure / Needs Based	4%	n=115

### 1.2.1 The reasons and consequences of entering care

The reasons that children enter the care system can vary greatly and often overlap. The most common reason is to protect a child from abuse (DHSSPS, 2016). The Department of Health (DH) and the Department of Justice (DJ) in NI define abuse as:

**Physical abuse** is deliberately physically hurting a child. It may take a variety of different forms, including hitting, biting, pinching, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning or suffocating a child.

**Sexual abuse** occurs when others use and exploit children sexually for their own gratification or gain, or the gratification of others. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape, or oral sex) or nonpenetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual

activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via e-technology). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

**Emotional abuse** is the persistent psychological maltreatment of a child, and it can have severe and persistent adverse effects on a child's emotional development. It may involve deliberately telling a child that they are worthless, or unloved and inadequate. It may include not giving a child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them, or 'making fun' of what they say or how they communicate.

**Neglect** is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs, whether it is adequate food, clothing, hygiene, supervision or shelter that is likely to result in the serious impairment of a child's health or development. Children who are neglected often also suffer from other types of abuse.

**Exploitation** is the intentional ill-treatment, manipulation or abuse of power and control over a child or young person; to take selfish or unfair advantage of a child or young person or situation, for personal gain. It may manifest itself in many forms such as child labour, slavery, servitude, engagement in criminal activity, begging, benefit or other financial fraud or child trafficking. It extends to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation.

**Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)** is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator (DHSSPS, 2017).

Every child or young person will enter care with their own unique set of circumstances, however, pre-care experiences can include physical, emotional and sexual abuse; it can also include family

breakdown, illness or disabilities affecting parents and primary caregivers or conditions affecting the child, including poor physical and mental health, behavioural disorders and learning difficulties. These children and young people are also more likely to have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, where a number of social and environmental risk factors are prevalent: lower socioeconomic status, poverty, higher rates of crime and antisocial behaviour, drug and alcohol addiction and poor parental mental health are all recognised as contributing to a child's potential care status (Bentley et al., 2018; Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF), 2008a).

Experiences before care can mean many children and young people are at greater risk than their peers of encountering difficulties throughout their lives; for example, young people in care are four times more likely to experience a mental health difficulty (Bentley et al., 2018), have poorer educational, employment and social outcomes and be over represented in the youth justice system (National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2010). In NI, overall child health outcomes are among the poorest in Western Europe despite the UK having one of the most advanced health care systems in the world. Indicators for childhood obesity, mental and emotional health, and mortality rates remain higher than those found in comparable countries (Hunter, Sparrow & Modi, 2016). However, for LACYP, their physical health outcomes tend to be lower than their peers (DHSSPS, 2009, 2014; NICE, 2013). Compared with children of the same age group and socio-economic status who live with birth parents, they are more likely to have incomplete vaccinations, lower health surveillance, poorer dental health, reduced nutritional intake and more susceptible to make unhealthy lifestyle choices including smoking, alcohol consumption and drug use (Williams et al. 2011; Mather, 2010). A longitudinal study of children in care in England reported that over half (52 per cent) had a physical health problem that required medical outpatient treatment, with just over a quarter (26 per cent) having more than one problem requiring treatment. The study also estimated that 15 per cent of children were likely to have required treatment from a specialist (Skuse & Ward, 2003). Similarly, Williams et al., (2011, p.280) reported that 'overall health care of children who have been established in care for more than six months is significantly worse than for those living in their

own homes, particularly with regard to emotional and behavioural health, and health promotion'. They also found that two thirds of looked after children had at least one physical health complaint such as speech and language problems, bedwetting, coordination difficulties and eye or sight conditions.

Health services available for LACYP are the same as for all children in NI, however due to their care status will have additional medical assessments carried out by a General Practitioner (GP) upon entry into the care system; these assessment will then occur every six months for children under five years or annually for older children. Each Trust has a designated specialist nurse or nurses who undertake a monitoring role in the health of those in their care. Health needs are also considered during a looked after child review and as part of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) assessment framework. In addition, health promotion measures are used to educate LACYP on issues such as healthy eating, exercise and lifestyle choices. For older LACYP, this can also include awareness-raising on sexual health and substance misuse (DE & DH, 2015). How effectively these services meet the health needs of these children and young people have prompted conflicting debate. Some evidence has suggested deterioration of health whilst in care (Gallagher, 1999); however, more recent research has reported improvements in health outcomes following entry to care (Layard & Dunn, 2009).

### **1.2.2 Education and LACYP**

The educational attainment of LACYP has been of concern for many decades, with a growing body of literature detailing consistently poor educational experiences and under achievement, and identifying the longer term impact this can have (Berridge, 2007; Goddard, 2000; Jackson, 1994, 1987; McClung & Gayle, 2010; Pringle, 1965; Sebba et al., 2015). A range of factors has been proposed to explain the low educational attainment of these children and young people. Some

authors have suggested that pre-care experiences of LACYP may disadvantage them particularly when an unstable, chaotic home environment can impact on their access to school; for example, higher numbers of looked after children are excluded from school, many are identified as having Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) and other types of Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Harker et al. 2003; Lipkin, 2016). Other research suggests that the structural features of the care system, including placement type and placement instability, can greatly influence educational outcomes (Berridge, 2007; Jackson, 2010). Evidence also indicates that children placed in foster or kinship care are more likely to have favourable educational outcomes in comparison to children who live in residential settings, with some authors identifying the negative influence of peers as a deterrent to educational progress (Biehal, Ellison, Baker & Sinclair, 2010). Placement changes, which are a common occurrence for many LACYP, have been identified as disruptive and unsettling; they can often lead to changing school, which further undermines the opportunity for a consistent educational experience (Boddy, 2013). In addition, the importance of safeguarding the physical and emotional needs of LACYP and maintaining family relationships can all lower the priority status given to education by social services (Berridge, 2007; Francis, 2011; Maxwell, Sodha & Stanley, 2006).

Although children who are looked after represent a very small proportion of school populations (usually less than 1%), they are recurrently identified as a vulnerable and marginalised group which requires Education Authorities (EA) to record and monitor their progress (DHSSPS, 2016). However, their educational needs can be easily overlooked and training and awareness on the particular circumstances of LACYP are an enduring under-developed aspect of teacher education (NICE, 2010; Perry, 2014). Research has indicated a crucial lack of communication and co-ordination between education and social services departments, with the result that educational needs are often overlooked due to poor or incomplete information management. For example, some social services departments do not hold central records of the schools attended by LACYP, while schools may be unaware that they have LACYP on their register or are unfamiliar with who to inform if they have concerns about performance or behaviour (Harker et al., 2003; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Lipkin,

2016;). In an attempt to address these issues, the Care Matters Strategy (2007) recommended the introduction of Personal Education Plans (PEP) to specifically focus on educational outcomes for LACYP in the UK. A PEP is developed by a nominated teacher with input from other relevant professionals and also in consultation with the young person which identifies educational targets and attainment over time so that areas of difficulty can be identified as early as possible. Crucially the PEP can offer some continuity if a child moves to a different school and serves to clarify communication between the relevant professionals involved in their lives. A phased introduction of non-statutory PEPs began in Northern Ireland in 2011; by 2014 over three quarters (77%) had a PEP in place (DE, 2011) and one third of care leavers also had a PEP by 2016 (DHSSPS, 2016).

### 1.2.3 Educational Attainment

Data shows recurrently low trends in the educational attainment LACYP. For example, in 2015/16, a third (33%) of NI carer leavers left school with no qualifications; this was the highest figure recorded since 2010/11 (DHSSPS, 2016). In addition, having a statutory statement of Special Educational Needs is more prevalent among school age LACYP, with a quarter (25%) having a statutory Statement of SEN compared to the general population (5%). Key stage assessments across primary and post-primary schools also suggest consistently poorer educational performance:

Table 1.2 LACYP Key Stage Assessments (DHSSPS, 2016)

Key Stage	LACYP	General School Population
1	78%	88%
2	44%	79%
3	40%	79%



Additionally 98% of LACYP who sat GCSE exams attained at least one GCSE at grades A\* to G in year 12, in comparison with 100%\* of the general Year 12 school population. 54% achieved at least 5 A\*-C GCSEs in Year 12 compared with 83% of the general Year 12 school population (DHSSPS, 2016).

#### **1.2.4 School Attendance**

By law, all children in NI must attend full time education from the age of 4 to 16 years. Pupil attendance rates are gathered from an annual school census and absence is recorded as either authorised or unauthorised. If non-attendance is without permission, it is recorded as unauthorised absence from school ([www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk)). Schools are required to record the reason for absence and have a responsibility to take action if regular attendance rates are reduced to 85% per school year ([www.citizensadvice.org](http://www.citizensadvice.org) ) Police have the authority to return a child to school if they are deemed to be absent without permission and parents can receive a fine as a consequence ([www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)).

Attendance at school amongst post-primary LACYP has been identified as a significant concern with these pupils typically missing higher than average amounts of time in school in comparison to non-looked after pupils. Non-attendance rates recorded from 2009 to 2017 indicated that days missed and recorded as unauthorised absence were almost three times higher for LACYP than the general pupil population (6.9% in comparison to 2.5%)(Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), 2014) . Due to the consistently low attendance rates of LACYP, the Department of Education Northern Ireland commissioned a research project to investigate how the education system could make improvements at post primary school level (DE, 2011). This was a significant research project aimed at helping the Department consider how they could best support looked after pupils to reach better attendance rates overall. The report identified a number of key factors impacting attendance; these factors demonstrated the complexity of LACYP's circumstances, and included influences such as peer

pressure to stay away from school, persistent disruptive behaviour leading to exclusion, underlying social and personal issues, difficulties affecting access to learning due to SEN, socioeconomic background, and placement type and placement stability. Interestingly, the findings established that higher attendance rates were associated with stable placements and foster care (DE, 2011).

### **1.3 Research Aims and Objectives**

The Department for Education in Northern Ireland and the Health and Social Care Trusts have a legal obligation to ensure that the educational needs of a looked after child or young person are met, however their poor school attendance rates and consistently lowered educational attainment continue to be problematic (DE, 2011; DHSSPS, 2017). Additionally, higher levels of unauthorised absence among LACYP are of concern due to the association with at-risk behaviours. Their care status means that these children and young people are already vulnerable, so where they are and what they are doing when not at school merits attention. Without suitable age appropriate adult supervision or support during school hours, the associated overall risks escalate and compound each other. It is therefore important that these authorities explore and seek to understand why school attendance is more difficult for LACYP and how appropriate policies and strategies that address the educational needs of these children and young people can be improved.

The key objectives of the research are to answer the following questions:

1. Why are there higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among post-primary looked after young people?
2. What does this tell us about their educational experiences?
3. What is helpful in addressing this problem?
4. What is unhelpful in addressing this problem?

## 1.4 Structure of the thesis

The remainder of the thesis is comprised of 6 chapters:

**Chapter 2.0** provides a detailed picture of who LACYP are using Ecological Systems Theory as a framework to understand their personal characteristics, family of origin, and the care and education systems in which they are situated. These are considered in relation to the historical context of the care system in NI, and the legislative framework that informs and guides current practice among statutory authorities.

**Chapter 3.0** presents the methodological approach adopted for this thesis. Unauthorised absence from school is investigated using exploratory, qualitative methods. The rationale for using this approach and its strengths and limitations are discussed.

**Chapter 4.0** presents the first research study and its findings from service providers who work with LACYP who engage in unauthorised absence from school. The study focuses on why they engage in this behaviour, what known factors contribute to this behaviour and what has helped to improve attendance.

**Chapter 5.0** presents the second research study and its findings from looked after young people who have engaged in unauthorised absence. This study focuses on their experiences in school, why they did not want to attend and what was helpful or unhelpful in addressing their attendance.

**Chapter 6.0** details the final research study undertaken with the VOYPIC Mentoring Project, where mentors are matched with a looked after young person to assist them with challenges they experience with education and school attendance.

**Chapter 7.0** discusses the overall findings from each research study and evaluates the extent to which the aims and objectives were achieved. This chapter also sets out recommendations for policy and practice and, suggestions for future research in this area.

## **Chapter 2.0**

**Theoretical Applications**

**Literature Review**

## **2.1 Overview**

This chapter begins by presenting the aim and method of search strategy applied to the literature review. It is followed by the application of a theoretical framework through which the educational outcomes of LACYP are examined by reviewing existing literature and research, to establish what is already known about this problem.

### **2.1 Aim and method of search strategy**

The aim of this literature review was to explore published literature and research studies relating to LACYP, school and education. In the initial stage of the search strategy, electronic searches were carried out on the following data bases: EBSCO, ERIC, Ovid, ProQuest, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, PubMed (1960-2018) using the terms 'looked after children', 'looked after children and young people', 'LAC', 'LACYP', 'children in care', 'unauthorised absence' and 'truancy' (See Appendix 1 for the search strategy and list of key terms used). Additionally textbooks were hand searched and websites (i.e. Google, Google Scholar) were searched using the key terms. The reference list details all electronic research papers, publications, textbooks and websites that were read to obtain information relevant to the topic of investigation.

### **2.2 Preliminary literature review**

An initial literature review was completed as a scoping exercise to determine what perspectives exist that can identify who LACYP are, and why their educational experience is problematic. This initial review revealed the lives of these children and young people are exceptionally complex, with a set of circumstances unique to each one. A number of key themes emerged from the literature. The first emergent theme was that in NI, significant legislation, policy and practice guidance exists to govern

how authorities meet the needs of children and young people in their care. LACYP are identified as a vulnerable group, and this status requires authorities to officially monitor and report their progress. Secondly when a child or young person enters the care system, authorities known collectively as 'corporate parents', have a statutory obligation to ensure that all the developmental needs identified in legislation are met to maximise positive outcomes. The third theme to emerge was the historical context of the care system including events that influenced its structure and management and how it has evolved to its current position. The final themes to emerge were the pre-care experiences of LACYP and their presenting difficulties and what impact their journey through the care system can have.

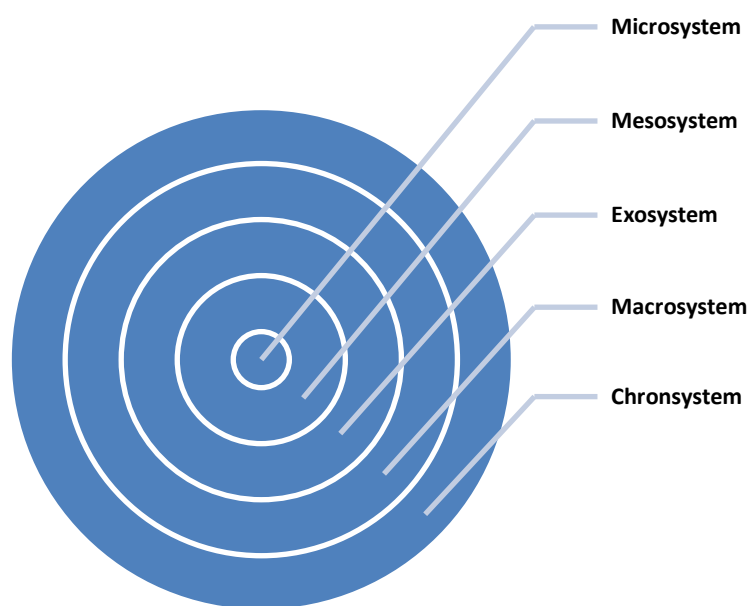
### **2.3 Applying a theoretical framework**

Given the complexities revealed in the initial literature review, a theoretical framework was considered the most appropriate way to examine the key themes identified. Commonly applied in educational psychology and social work practice (Pardeck, 1988; Siporin, 1980; Sawssan et al., 2017), Ecological Systems Theory (EST) understands individuals in the context of how they interact with their environment, and how their environment interacts with them. Collectively these processes shape human development over time (Gittermann & Salmon, 2009). Germain (1978) conceptualized the ecological approach as a number of hierarchal systems, like a set of boxes with smaller boxes fitting into increasingly larger ones. For example, an individual may exist in a family system, which in turn exists in a community; the community is located in a region that also is surrounded by cultural, legal and political systems. In this ecological system, individuals are viewed as constantly interacting with and adapting to their environment in what is described as '*interconnected transactional networks*' (Mattaini, Lowrey & Meyer, 2002, p16.) EST is a useful framework in which to understand LACYP because it separates and identifies the specific factors in their lives relevant to education and

unauthorised absence from school. Each factor can then be explored individually and collectively to understand why difficulties have occurred.

Developmental theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994) developed the ecological systems theory to explain how the characteristics of a child and the characteristics of the environments the child interacts with, shape how that child grows and develops. He conceptualised five ecological systems that a child interacts with:

Figure 2.0 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (1994) (simplified version).



The child is placed at the centre of the model, surrounded by a series of systems characterised by their relationships and interactions that directly or indirectly influence the child's developmental trajectory.

**1. Microsystem** is the first and most immediate layer of the systems model that encompasses relationships, interpersonal interactions and immediate surroundings. For children, this represents their personal characteristics as well as relationships with parents, siblings, peers and other individuals in the school environment. The manner of these relationships and the contexts in which they occur affect how the child grows; the more supportive and nurturing these relationships and contexts are the better outcomes for the child. A child's personal traits and how these affect interactions with people in the microsystem will also influence and affect how they are treated in return.

**2. Mesosystem** is the second layer which surrounds the microsystem and evolves from the different interactions between the characters of the microsystem. The mesosystem represents the way the different microsystems work together for the sake of the child. For example, this includes how parents or carers interact with each other in their caregiving role or the way in which they interact with school teachers. Again, the quality of the mesosystem can positively or negatively influence the child's development.

**3. Exosystem** is the third layer of the model that includes other people and organisations that a child may not encounter or interact with frequently, but who affect the child indirectly. Exosystems typically consist of extended family, parent's workplaces, and school governance committees that represent the larger social system in which a child is impacted by external events such as when a parent is promoted in their profession, the child benefits from this indirectly because their parent may receive an increase in salary that in return means the parent has more financial resources to provide for their child's needs.

**4. Macrosystem** is the fourth layer of the ecological model most remote from the child, but still has a substantial impact on their development. This layer influences the developing child in a much broader context; the beliefs of the family, community, society, government and culture all impact the child based on social expectations and norms. For example a child will be influenced by the



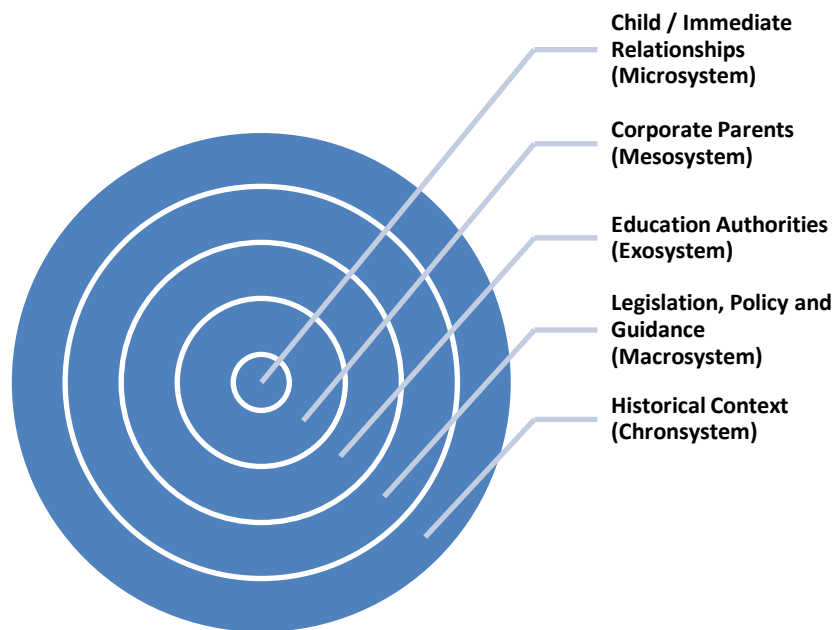
political context of their society, or influenced by religious / cultural effects placed on society as a whole.

**5. Chronosystem** is the final system and represents the transitions and shifts over time of a child's development. It includes environmental changes, transitions and historical events each of which negatively or positively influence the child. Examples of the chronosystem are seen when a child moves from one city to another or when they transition from primary to post primary school, how successful these transitions are will affect the child's developmental trajectory.

## **2.4 Applying Ecological Systems Theory to Education and LACYP**

In order to understand who LACYP are and why their educational experience is problematic, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory has particular explanatory power that establishes the interconnected relationships, conditions and processes of their lives. EST defines layers of the environment and interprets a child's development using the systems of relationships in their environment as a lens. Interaction, conflict, deficits or change in any layer of the system can individually and collectively affect a child's developmental trajectory. The relevance of an ecological framework in considering the educational outcomes of LACYP is twofold. Firstly, it widens the boundaries beyond the individual characteristics of children and young people themselves, as it considers the familial and social context in which children are cared for by authorities. Secondly, the ecological model is transactional; it acknowledges the individual and their immediate and wider influences as actively and continuously engaging with each other. By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to children and young people cared for by authorities, it is possible to examine their personal characteristics and the environmental processes or influences that impact their educational outcomes in a more structured and cohesive way. The following model (Figure 2.1) proposes the structure of systems surrounding LACYP. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Figure 2.1 Ecological System Model of LACYP



#### 2.4.1 Microsystem: The Child and Immediate Relationships

EST places the child at the core of the model, recognising their personal traits and characteristics, and how they interact with significant others in their lives including parents, siblings, teachers, and peers both in school and the community in which they live. Using the EST framework, characteristics of LACYP and their immediate relationships are demonstrated in existing literature.

#### Mental Health

LACYP are indicated as presenting with higher than average mental, emotional and behavioural difficulties (McDonald et al., 2011; Simkiss, 2012) and psychiatric disorders (Goodman, Ford, Corbin & Meltzer, 2004). These characteristics are, in part, proposed to result from pre-care experiences of abuse, neglect and rejection that have led to intervention by the authorities (Garrett, 1999). Recent figures show that suspected abuse and neglect has accounted for 80 percent of children placed on

the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2017). While this type of maltreatment has many forms, it is typically identified as any act of deliberately hurting a child that results in physical and/or psychological injury (DHSSPS, 2017; [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)). How these types of adverse experiences impact on a child will also depend on a number of contributory factors such as the nature of the experience (e.g. abuse, neglect, poverty), the severity and time span of the experience, as well as the quality of the family and social environment (Dube et al., 2003). The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2015) found that although LACYP have many of the same mental health risks and problems as their peers, the severity is often exacerbated due to their pre-care experiences of poverty, abuse and neglect. In addition, other influential factors can begin before birth, placing a child at increased risk of developing problems. These can include the physical and mental health of mothers, as well as prenatal maternal behaviours such as exposure to drug, alcohol and tobacco use (Huang, Caughy, Genevro & Miller, 2005; Piaget & Edmond, 2016).

The Mental Health Foundation (1999) describes children and young people who are mentally healthy as having the ability to:

- Develop psychologically, emotionally, creatively, intellectually and spiritually;
- Initiate, develop and sustain mutually satisfying personal relationships;
- Use and enjoy solitude;
- Have an awareness of others and empathise with them;
- Play and learn;
- Develop a sense of right and wrong;
- Resolve setbacks or problems and are able to learn from them.

The baseline prevalence of mental ill health amongst all children and young people in NI is estimated to be 25% higher than in England, Scotland and Wales (Bamford, 2006a) and this has been increasing

since 2010 (NICCY, 2017; Kahn, 2016). Indicators for poor mental health include disproportionately higher rates of suicide in NI among under 18 year olds compared to other parts of the UK, increasing anti-depressant prescription rates for 0-19 year olds, rising self-harm rates for 0-18 year olds and poor emotional wellbeing of children and young people using self-report measures (NICCY, 2017). Within the EST model this characteristic of LACYP is significant because the prevalence of mental health and emotional difficulties are even higher i.e. Blower et al., (2004) concluded that the majority of children and young people looked after by local authorities suffer from chronic and disabling mental health problems despite early identification of their difficulties, attempts at interventions and supportive care settings. A decade later, McSherry et al., (2015) reported behavioural, emotional and mental health were the most significant health issue for LACYP surveyed in NI, with 40 per cent having been diagnosed with behavioural problems, 35 per cent with emotional difficulties, and 21 per cent with depression or anxiety. A number of other studies have reported similarly high rates of mental health difficulties among looked after children, with almost half of those in care meeting the diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015; Luke, Sinclair, Woolgar & Sebba, 2014; Ward, 2016).

Why mental health difficulties are so prevalent among LACYP has been associated with pre-care experiences of maltreatment that have resulted in psychological trauma, which manifests in symptoms such as depression, anxiety, self-harm and substance abuse (Oswald, Heil & Goldbeck, 2004). Other studies have suggested that emotional stressors in childhood such as neglect or abuse can result in changes to brain circuits and systems that reduce the developmental capacity of children. Brain studies of abuse survivors have found clinical variances in the structure of the amygdala, pre-frontal cortex and hippocampus each of which has a key role in stress responses, emotional, behavioural and cognitive development and mood regulation (Anda et al., 2005; Beers 2002; Bremner 2003a; Sanchez, Ladd & Plotsky, 2001). Other studies of maltreatment in childhood indicate neurochemical changes in the brain as a result of exposure to repetitive experiences of elevated stress that increase levels of the hormone cortisol. Prolonged exposure to cortisol released

as part of the stress response process can damage the developing brain (Bruce, Fisher, Pears & Levine, 2009), and lead to long term difficulties regulating thought, emotion and behaviour. Physical abuse can also damage the developing brain resulting in difficulties with information processing, learning, memory, cognition, personality, behaviour and emotional regulation (Caffey, 1972; Lazenbatt, 2010). The severity of damage caused will determine the long term effects but in extreme cases, some face life long challenges affecting their personality, relationships and ability to lead an independent life ([www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)).

### Emotional health

From a developmental perspective, all LACYP are learning to understand themselves and the world around them through a series of complex psychological interactions and processes that begin primarily through their relationships with parents. Often, however, adverse childhood experiences mean that these interactions and processes have been damaged in some way (Anda et al., 2006; Anda et al., 1999; Chartier, Walker & Naimark 2010; Felitti et al., 1998; Rutter, 1971). Psychologist John Bowlby (1969) was one the first theorists who identified that the earliest bonds formed by children with their parents or caregivers had an important impact on their psychological development. His work outlined how mental health and behavioural problems could be attributed to early childhood. The central theme of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1977) is that caregivers who are available and responsive to their child's needs establish a sense of security in their children. As the infant recognises the dependability of the caregiver, a secure base is created that allows the child to confidently explore the world. During the 1970's Mary Ainsworth expanded greatly on Bowlby's original work with her innovative 'Strange Situation' research that revealed the intense effects of attachment on behaviour. Ainsworth (1978) described three main styles of attachment consisting of secure, insecure ambivalent and insecure avoidant.

According to Ainsworth (1978), children with a secure attachment experience warm responsive relationships with their caregiver that encourages autonomy. These children cognitively have a positive view of themselves and others because they know that they are loved and associate safety and protection with their caregiver. When these children become adults they are comfortable with closeness and separateness in their interpersonal relationships and are self-reliant, confident, accommodating and helpful towards others, have high self-esteem, tend to be successful and are of the belief that the world is a place to be explored. Insecure ambivalent children experience warmth from their caregiver but they do not respond to their basic needs promptly, consistently or provide security and protection. While these children learn that they are worthy of love they view their caregiver as unreliable and untrustworthy which leads them to view the world as unsafe. This tends to result in dependent behaviour towards their caregiver but also a fear of abandonment as these children never know if their needs will be met. When the insecure ambivalent child reaches adulthood they can fear abandonment from their romantic partners and friends, they can become overly reliant on others with a tendency to behave immaturely. Further to this these individuals are more prone to emotional or mental health difficulties during times of stress (Ainsworth, 1989). Children with an insecure avoidant attachment style experience neglectful relationships with their caregiver who does not respond to their needs to provide warmth, security or protection. As infants they learn that they are not loved and tend to view others as unreliable, unresponsive and unsafe. In turn, as adults, they have difficulty forming relationships as they do not trust others, do not believe they are worthy of love and do not expect others will meet their needs. These individuals are likely to have problems with interpersonal relationships due to the difficulties they have bonding as well as having low self-esteem and confidence (Ainsworth, 1989). When Attachment Theory is applied to the characteristics of LACYP, they may be situated anywhere on the continuum depending on their experiences. However many studies report the extensive difficulties LACYP experience when primary relationships and bonds have been damaged in some way (James, Winmill, Anderson &

Alfoadari, 2011; Atwool, 2006; Rees & Taylor, 2006; Tarren-Sweeny, Hazell & Carr, 2008; Ward, 2009).

#### 2.4.2 Mesosystem: The Care System and Corporate Parents

The second layer of the ecological model surrounding LACYP is represented by the care system and the corporate parents responsible for their day to day care. Traditionally parents typically meet the emotional, physical and educational needs of their children and have a co-ordinating role in their life. When children and young people become looked after in NI, HSCTs assume these generic responsibilities in what is termed *corporate parenting* (Care Matters, 2006). The underpinning principle of corporate parenting is that 'Trusts and professionals who work with children in care should exercise their corporate parenting role responsibly to ensure the very best outcomes, *the same outcomes they would want for their own children*' (Care Matters in NI, 2007, p. 59).

Implementation of corporate parenting for LACYP is arranged by local HSCTs who manage the duties of care invested in them by the government. These duties are divided into a number of core areas including health, education, placement and accommodation and are assigned to those people involved in each child's life, including birth parents, foster carers, social workers (both residential and field), social work managers and therapists (Bullock et al., 2006). In terms of an immediate corporate parent, every looked after child or young person is allocated a social worker who has the primary responsibility of designing a care plan and monitoring its implementation. The plan should detail how the child's needs are to be met in care, including their health and educational needs as well as contact with family members. The care plan is part of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) framework which provides comprehensive guidance to assess and develop a care pathway plan (DHSSPS, 2011). Two to four weeks after admission to care, a statutory review takes place to ensure the care plan is effectively meeting the child's needs. A

number of people can attend or contribute to these meetings including parents, children, social workers, senior social workers, independent reviewing officers, foster carers and their social workers, health professionals such as GPs, medical consultants (psychiatrists and/or psychologists); education professionals (school principal / teacher), along with representatives from any other agencies involved in support provision. A second review takes place three months later and then at six month intervals thereafter for as long as the child is in care ([www.VOYPIC.org](http://www.VOYPIC.org)). Additionally, a needs assessment and leaving care pathway plan must be drawn up and reviewed for a young person aged 16 years or older leaving care to ensure appropriate support from Trusts is in place relating to accommodation, education / training, finances and health. To assist in the planning process, all young people are allocated a Personal Adviser, so support can be provided until they are 21 or, if in full time education 25 years old (DHSSPS, 2015; [www.gov.co.uk](http://www.gov.co.uk)).

Each local Trust is required to report annually to the Health and Social Care Board detailing their delegated statutory function which includes their policy on corporate parenting of looked after children. Reports include the numbers of children in care, placement type, and activity level among staff in terms of contact with children, planning and any current successes or challenges that the Trusts have encountered throughout the financial year. Additionally, the report provides analysis of the discharge of statutory functions within the Trust; identifies trends including the number of children cared for, type of children and reasons for entry to the care system. It highlights the required action to improve outcomes; and facilitates professional learning within and across Trust's through the further development of performance management and benchmarking techniques ([www.westerntrust.hscni.net](http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net)).

A number of significant safeguarding measures are in place for anyone who works within the care system. All personnel must have an Access-NI Enhanced Criminal Records Check<sup>2</sup> which will indicate if that individual is known to policing authorities or social services ([www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)) in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Access-NI Criminal Records Check: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/accessni-criminal-record-checks/apply-accessni-check>



determine if they pose any risk of harm to children. Anyone who works in social care, social work students, qualified social workers and managers must also register with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). The NISCC Standards and Codes of Practice form the regulatory framework in social care work and outline the values, attitudes, behaviours, knowledge and skill required for competent practice. NISCC can also remove a registrant if they are deemed unfit to practise due to illness, misconduct or criminal offences. Concerns around the fitness to practise of social care professionals can be reported by any individuals to the NISCC who are obliged to investigate and take appropriate action ([www.nisccinfo](http://www.nisccinfo) ).

In 2005, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) was established in NI to ensure that authorities met their statutory duties in the provision of regulated and quality social care. RQIA provides guidance for looked after children service provision including children's homes, leaving care services and supported accommodation. Additionally, RQIA sets standards for employers of social workers and social care workers to ensure best practice measures are facilitated. Bi-annual inspections are carried out on all residential settings, these are often unannounced. Inspectors will consider all aspects of the care provision and assess if the care provided is safe, effective, compassionate and well led by those employed to deliver the service ([www.rqia.org.uk](http://www.rqia.org.uk)). If services do not comply with standards, the RQIA has the authority to enforce or prosecute when necessary.

When a child becomes looked after by statutory authorities, it is assumed that this is the best way to protect them from harm. However, many who enter care who also receive poor quality care (Talbot, 2013; Hannon, Wood & Bazalgette, 2010). No child will enter the care system with an identical set of circumstances, although all will share some similarities in their experience of entering the care system and the associated trauma or losses they may suffer. Within the EST model, disconnection to family, culture, community, friends and often their previous school, can each result in a layering of traumatic experience that further hinders a child's ability to make sense of their lives and develop trust in those around them ([www.communityservices.act.gov](http://www.communityservices.act.gov)). Studies that have explored the

experiences of young people entering the care system have found that many are known to social services (NSPCC, 2017) but that a lack of information prior to admission increased feelings of fear at the point of leaving their birth family. For example, some young people stated they had not known where they were being taken, or what was happening to them and to other family members. They also described feeling unsafe because they did not know where they would be living or who would be looking after them (Wood & Selwyn, 2015). Many children entering care therefore experience considerable uncertainty as they question why they had to leave their birth family, ruminating if it was it their fault and if, or when, they will be able to return home. There are also likely to be questions about their current placement, the complex legal process surrounding entry to the care system and the amount of time required to determine their future. Coman, Dickson and McGill (2016) reported in their clinical work that cared for children often explain their circumstances in terms of 'there is something wrong with me'. Others have attributed their situation to their 'mum working hard at the moment', 'moving house', 'being sick' or being 'busy having another baby'. In all cases, the children and young people perceived themselves as being to blame for their circumstances either because of an individual and/or personal defect, or because they have come to believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with a child making demands on a parent.

The journey that children and young people make through the care system is variable depending on their needs, characteristics, family circumstances and availability of services within Trusts. In order to map the journey, the Care Plan is core to a coherent planning process to ensure their needs are best met. An effective plan will be based primarily on the specific needs of an individual child and not determined by his/her legal status or limited to decisions about placement. In this respect, it should be possible to read a care plan and gain a clear overview of the child's history and how this has been used to inform analysis of the child's needs (NICE, 2010).

The care system has received considerable attention by academics and policy makers due to concerns relating to the consistent and continuing low educational attainment of those in its care

(Care Matters, 2006; Care Matters in NI, 2007; Gilligan, 2007; Mannay et al., 2017; McClung & Gayle, 2010). Studies that have explored how features of the care system impact on educational outcomes have identified that placement quality is positively associated with higher educational, social and emotional overall (Fernandez, 2015; McClung & Gayle, 2010). When a child or young person is admitted to the care system, one of the key questions asked by either the Court or HSCT is where will they live? Can they continue to live with their family of origin or do they need to be placed in 'out of home' care? If the assessment process indicates it is in the best interests of the child to move to an out of home placement, the HSCT must decide what alternative placement meets the optimum needs of the child align this with the placement options that are available in their area. During 2016, the majority (87%; n=2513) of LACYP were placed in out of home care (DHSSPS, 2016). Of these, over three quarters (77%; n=2225) were located in foster placements and the remainder (10%; n=288) were located in residential homes, including secure and needs-based units. Research shows that foster placements are known to have the best likelihood of positive outcomes (Sebba et al., 2015) because they mimic traditional family settings that include consistency of carers over time as well as a stable and secure environment. Residential settings such as care homes have been identified as more difficult places in which to meet the emotional needs of children and young people (Stanley, 2007). In these settings, normalisation, or the process of ordinary everyday living, can be very difficult to achieve due to the high level of emotional needs. Crucially, the onus on social workers and residential staff to provide stable, supportive and empowering life experiences for young people who carry high levels of mental distress, anxiety, and who's future maybe unclear is an enduring challenge (Ward, 2009).

Where the care system places children and young people is highlighted as consistently problematic due to a high ratio of placement instability and frequent moves (Berridge, 2007; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Frequent placement changes have been an enduring criticism of the care system for many decades (Bilson & Barker, 1995; Department of Health and Social Security, 1985; Kirby, 1994; NICCY, 2016; McSherry, 2015) and is deemed sufficiently distressing for young people that it is recognised

as an indicator for emotional harm (NICE, 2013). Even if the circumstances of a placement have broken down and moving is the best option, young people may still experience the psychosocial effects of separation from carers, parents, siblings, peers, school and their wider community (Ward, 2011). Despite the recognition that placement instability is a key problem for LACYP, it continues to be the experience of many. Foster placements, while viewed as the better option for the child because they mimic traditional family life, may not always be the best place to meet their needs particularly if the child is experiencing high levels of trauma, emotional or behavioural challenges. However, for authorities they are a cheaper option in comparison to residential homes (NAO, 2014). This can mean that children or young people whose needs would be better met in a children's home or specialist unit often have to experience many placement breakdowns in foster settings before they are able to access the best environment for them. Equally, a lack of foster carers may mean a child is placed in residential setting when they may have better outcomes in foster placements ([www.becomecharity.org.uk](http://www.becomecharity.org.uk)). Academic, social and psychological outcomes for those who have many placement changes are often worse than for those who do not. More specifically, the impact of placement instability on education is two-fold. Moving placement often involves a change of school or additional travel to remain in an existing school (Care matters, 2006; Holland et al., 2005); additionally, it means a child or young person effectively has to 'begin again' with a new set of carers in a different environment where it will take time to gain trust and security (Pecora, 2012) and recover from the distress associated with the move (O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007). In order to understand why placement instability occurs, SCIE (2009) identified 5 key factors that contribute to placement changes:

a change of social worker

over-optimistic expectations

placement breakdown, particularly for teenagers

any policy or practice which generally discourages children from remaining fostered / cared for after the age of 17

the child's level of emotional disturbance and motivation to remain in the placement also appears to be a key factor ([www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk))

Other reasons for placement change have been associated with externalising behaviour problems such as aggression, conduct disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Additionally older children who have experienced longer periods of pre-care abuse or neglect, length of time in care, residential care as a first placement setting, separation from siblings, and experience of multiple social workers are all associated with placement breakdown (NICE, 2013). Gilbertson and Barber (2010) explored the breakdown of foster placement with former foster carers themselves, who identified placement deterioration and subsequent breakdown were often precipitated by perceived lack of support from social services, intrusive practice by social workers and placements that were made based on urgency rather than assessment of foster carer ability to match the identified needs of children. Even when a placement change is desired it can severely lessen the sense of identity and self-esteem of a child or young person and a system that allows multiple moves may be seen as harmful in itself (NICE, 2006). Placement difficulties also represent the problems within the interactions between children and the care system, which as outlined by EST can have a negative effect on their development.

Another feature of the care system that impacts education outcomes is the journey young people must make out of statutory care. This is a significant transition period for LACYP as they move towards independence and adulthood. Care leavers are identified as young people aged 16 years or older who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14. In NI, social services have a statutory duty to continue to support young people until they are 21 or 25 if in full time education / training. When a young person reaches 16, preparation begins for the transition to adulthood. Those who have stable foster or kinship placements can remain with this family until they are 21

years old with financial assistance from local Trusts; however, those in residential placements will begin to prepare for independent living at age 16 years and move out by age 18 years when they legally become an adult. Care leavers can move from care placements (residential and foster) into independent living, supported accommodation or family setting (DHSSPS, 2016). On average, 300 young people leave care every year in NI, most are aged between 16 and 18. By comparison, those who have not been looked after leave home at 22 years or older (DHSSPS, 2015; VOYPIC, 2002). Central to the leaving care process is initial planning for the future, which involves a needs assessment to determine individual requirements, including health, education, training and employment, accommodation, family contact, independent living and finances. A pathway plan is then completed to detail how these needs will be met, and this is reviewed regularly to ensure the plan is working. Young people are entitled to a Personal Adviser who should assist in the leaving care process and act as a source of support and guidance as young people make the transition. While these services are in place in recognition that for many young people disadvantage continues after leaving care (Williams & Rodgers, 2016), disadvantage can be reinforced by the circumstances they encounter as they make the transition from care into adulthood (Simmons & Thompson, 2016).

Within the EST model, children and young people interact with the care system both directly, through contact with the various professionals who act in a corporate parenting capacity, and indirectly through the governance, safeguarding and regulations of their HSCT that specify how these interactions should take place. There are key events highlighted within these interactions; contact is initiated by the referral and subsequent admission to the care system, the pathway through the care system, followed by the subsequent transition out of the care system. The quality of each stage is determined by how well the care system can interact with those in its care, and by how well LACYP are able to engage with corporate parents. However, the care system is responsible for ensuring that it provides high quality, meaningful engagement with young people that is tailored to their individual characteristics and needs appropriate to their age.

### 2.4.3 Exosystem: The Education System

The Education System represents the third system surrounding the child, and consists of statutory agencies and schools in NI, working together to meet the education needs of children and young people. The education of all children and young people from 4 to 16 years old is the responsibility of the Department of Education (DE), a devolved governmental department of the NI Executive. The Department has responsibility for pre-school, primary, post-primary and special education; the youth service; the promotion of community relations within and between schools; and teacher education and salaries ([www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)). The DE delegates some of their responsibilities to the Education Authority (EA), which was established by the Education Act Northern Ireland (2014). The EA is responsible for ensuring that efficient and effective primary and secondary education services are available to meet the needs of pupils ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)). Additionally, the DE delegates responsibility for the curriculum taught in primary and post-primary school to the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) who advise what should be taught, monitor examinations, and award GCSE and A-Level qualifications ([www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk)). The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) as the largest employer of teachers in NI, also contribute to the curriculum review, selection of pupils, pre-school education, pastoral care and leadership within schools ([www.onlineccms.com](http://www.onlineccms.com)).

The DE annually collect data as part of the summary of annual examination results exercise. The exercise takes place in September of each year and collects information of the performance of pupils in Year12 and Year 14 in NI ([www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)). This type of data collection and analysis results in the use of league tables by schools to demonstrate how well they are working compared to other schools. It is assumed that this data will inform authorities when a school is doing well, or not however many authors suggest league tables do nothing more than increase pressures on schools and teaching staff to focus their attention on the high achievers, because they will ultimately increase the perception that the school is academically excellent or an advantaged school within

these tables (Equality Commission, 2008). Goldstein, 2008 suggests pressure on teachers to meet performance targets and maximise league table rankings can lead to school strategising to improve their position at the expense of particular kinds of pupils. For example, schools only putting certain pupils in for certain exams, to maximise chances of success or taking low achievers out of test results altogether.

When difficulties with educational attainment occur, the EA can provide an Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to assist schools in identifying the special educational needs of pupils, and provide advice to teachers, parents / carers and others on the type of help or support a pupil may need to progress in their learning.

Educational Psychologists can help by:

Assessing difficulties through testing, observation and discussion with the child, teachers and parents

Helping schools implement the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice

Giving advice to teachers and parents

Providing counselling and guidance for the child

Arranging extra support for the child in school (e.g. an outreach teacher to help with learning or behavioural difficulties)

Recommending statutory assessment (and possible “statementing”<sup>3</sup>)

Contributing to reviews of the child’s progress

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<sup>3</sup> A statement of special educational needs sets out a child's needs and the help they should have. It is reviewed every year to make sure that any extra support given meets a child's needs.  
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/special-educational-needs-statements>



Providing information and training for schools on particular issues and how children may be supported ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)).

The law in NI specifies there is an entitlement to education for 12 years. However, some pupils have attendance or other problems that negatively affect their education and they need assistance to overcome this. When school attendance is identified as an issue, the EA provide an Educational Welfare Service (EWS) which is a specialist education support service designed to assist pupils and their families to get maximum benefit from the education system. The EWS work in partnership with pupils, their families, the schools, other education services as well as statutory and voluntary agencies. When problems, such as poor attendance, arise, the EWS appoints an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) who will:

Meet with the school to respond to written referrals

Make an assessment of the situation and establish a support plan with the young person, parent and school

Act on a parent's request to talk to the young person's school or other agencies on their behalf.

Make referrals to other support services e.g. Medical officer or Educational Psychologist.

Signpost families to other specialist support projects.

If difficulties continue with a pupil's attendance, the EWS can apply to the court for an Education Supervision Orders or Parental Prosecution for parents/carers whose children are not attending school on a regular basis ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)).

In recognition of the lower educational attainment of LACYP, the DE introduced Personal Education Plans (PEP) in a phased approach in 2011, following the recommendations of the Care Matters strategy (DHSSPS, 2006). The sole aim of a PEP is to improve educational outcomes for looked after pupils by establishing clear goals and actions to respond effectively to every child's needs and

provide a continuous record of their achievements. In addition, the PEP is an opportunity to listen to children and young people, record their hopes and concerns, and clearly outline their aspirations (DE, 2011). In addition to the PEP, the DE published a resource booklet for school staff 'Putting Care into Education' (DE, 2018) providing insight and guidance into how early relational trauma and stress affects child development, why school can be challenging for care-experienced pupils, and how school staff can help.

In May 2018, both the Department of Health (DH) and the DE launched a joint consultation on the draft Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives (DE, 2018). The strategy represents a significant shift in the way LACYP are supported in education by moving away from the perspective that aspects of a child's life occur in isolation, and encompassing the 'whole child' approach, which is a principle feature of the EST model. It is hoped the final document will be ready and endorsed by the NI Executive Government when the current political impasse has been resolved. The draft Strategy was developed with the input of LACYP and other key stakeholders, and was based on the premise that a collaborative approach could improve the life outcomes for those currently or previously cared for by authorities. Both Departments have pledged to support children and young people in care; those on the edge of care and also those young people who have left care and are still in need of some support. Improving educational outcomes and the closing the attainment gap are outlined as two of the key objectives of the strategy which specifies how this should happen within the education system:

**At School:** Teachers, parents, carers and corporate parents should foster aspirations in LACYP and be aspirational for them. This relates not only to educational attainment but also to wider measures of success including personal development, skills, positive choices and pathways to employment. Attending and learning should be an enjoyable childhood experience so schools should provide tailored support for LACYP to maximise positive and engaging learning experiences. Key to this is the development of meaningful relationships between school staff and LACYP, with a capacity building

programme for school staff as the first step to achieve this. Additionally joint working between the DE and DoH and also between HSCTs and the EA is essential to enhance a better understanding of the issues faced by each profession and to demonstrate the strongest dedication to help every child, wherever that child is placed, so that they reach to achieve their maximum potential. The education of every looked after child and young person should be considered, planned and reviewed taking into account their individual circumstances, challenges and strengths, using their Personal Education Plan (PEP).

**Outside school:** The strategy identified that relationships outside of school can help children develop confidence in learning, and to experience a different kind of relationship with adult instructors or supervisors than those typical of the formal school environment. It is vital that LACYP are supported to take part in extra-curricular activities with shared responsibility for this between schools and HSC Trusts. Like any other child, LACYP need and should be provided with access to learning support at home. This should consist of having reading material; having somewhere to study and complete homework; having access to extra study support if required; having access to a computer (either at home or through library and school networks) including the Internet for research and homework projects; having a dedicated LACYP trusted person in school; being able to access work experience placements as outlined in Personal Education Plans, (with HSC organisations giving priority to looked after children and care experienced young people); and making sure access to careers and education advice is facilitated. Learning support should also extend to all carers, including residential care staff so there is a holistic approach to facilitate the participation of LACYP in education. This should include ensuring consistent school attendance, attendance at parent's evenings, helping with homework, and instilling and inspiring love of learning in the child.

**Leaving school:** The strategy recognises the circumstances of young people leaving care at 18 will differ significantly to their peers who in most cases will still have the support of family throughout their course of study or training. Care leavers equally should be supported to make the transition to

university as seamless as possible. They should be made aware of the Tick-the-Box<sup>4</sup> campaign and encouraged and assisted to tick the box. In doing so this will alert universities and further education colleges that a formerly looked after young person is in attendance and enable them to access additional support, and universities or further education providers can give them priority consideration ([www.ucas.org.uk](http://www.ucas.org.uk) ; [www.voypic.org](http://www.voypic.org) ). HSCTs should provide young people with the practical, emotional and financial support to enable them to progress to further and higher education or training. This includes support to meet the costs associated with education or training where the young person continues to study beyond 21 years. Additionally some young people may need to be given a second chance to gain qualifications and consideration should be given to facilitating their re-entry to programmes of education (DE & DH, 2018).

#### Interaction of child with education system

In line with the EST model the interactions between the child and the education system play a pivotal role. The characteristics of children who have experienced disrupted or disturbed bonding with primary caregivers may also present with difficulties in the classroom that inhibit their educational progress (Egeland, Sroufe & Erickson, 1980; Kenney, 2008). Children's attachment style with their parents can serve as a template for the relationships they have with others and with those who they engage with. In the school environment this affiliation between teacher and child is likely to mirror the attachment the child has with its parents or caregivers (O'Connor & McCartney, 2006). As they engage in educational activities directed by their teacher children use their teacher as a secure base with a growing range of research that supports the belief that children with secure attachments are more successful in education (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). O'Connor and McCartney (2006) found support for this assertion by demonstrating that pupils with insecure parental

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<sup>4</sup> The Tick the Box campaign aims to make sure young people know that it is important to tick the care experienced box on their UCAS application, so their applications can be processed fairly and they can access the right support at university. <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/tick-box>

attachments also had insecure teacher attachments in three independent samples. Their study suggested that teachers were more likely to have difficulty connecting with students who had an insecure attachment style because these children had negative views of the teacher that diminished the attachment process. As a result insecure children were more likely to have problems in the educational context than securely attached children because secure children were more likely to establish a secure relationship with the teacher. Their trust in their relationship enabled them to have the confidence necessary to succeed, by utilising the teacher as a secure base from which they could explore and engage in the school environment.

Howes, Phillipsen & Peisner-Feinberg (1999) proposed that there are four types of attachment to teachers that mirror those of parent/child attachment consisting of secure, avoidant, resistant and near secure. Avoidant children are more engaged in classroom materials than in their peers or teacher. When they are distressed they tend not to seek out their teacher and may even move away from their teacher when their teacher tries to comfort them. Resistant children are short-tempered with their teacher and can be demanding or impatient. In contrast, secure children will accept comfort if upset while readily share what they are doing with the teacher and can ask for help when they need it. Near secure children display a mixture of avoidant and secure behaviours where they may distrust the teacher but will also keenly take part in classroom activities (Granot & Mayseless, 2001).

It can also be helpful to understand characteristics of LACYP in the context of the parental and social environment of a developing child (Crouch & Milner, 1993). Social Learning Theory proposes that children learn by observing the behaviours of other people in a process known as modelling; they then evaluate the effect of those behaviours by observing the positive and negative consequences (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theories compliment the EST model because they acknowledge the interactions between children and their immediate caregivers; members of a child's immediate network act as role models and if parents, siblings, extended family or friends are observed engaging

in positive educational or academic related behaviour then the child is more likely to develop positive expectations of that behaviour, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will engage in that behaviour themselves.

In a social learning context, LACYP coming from a background of abuse, neglect or rejection may not have experienced positive reinforcement of the educational process such as parents who have not achieved academically, or who have previously disengaged from school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Marchant, Paulson & Rothlisberg, 2001). Research has found that parents play a key role in motivating their children to engage in education. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) illustrated three dimensions of parental involvement consisting of a) personal involvement relating to the allocation of emotional resources to the child, b) cognitive/intellectual involvement by stimulating children through activities such as reading and c) behavioural involvement which the child can observe such as when a parent attends a school activity. Gonzalez-De Hass, Willems & Doan-Holbein, (2005) studied parental involvement and the academic achievement of children, finding that when parents are more involved, students reported greater levels of effort, attention and concentration. Students also demonstrated a higher level of interest in learning, experienced a greater sense of competence and were more likely to take personal responsibility for their learning. Steinberg, et al., (1992) examined specific types of parental involvement such as helping with homework, attending school activities and monitoring of academic progress and found that parental involvement is most likely to benefit educational outcomes when it occurs within an authoritative parenting style typified by parental acceptance and warmth as well as behavioural supervision that still allows for a level of democracy and self-determination on the part of the child.

Motivation is seen as a key factor when determining a student's achievements in education (Ryan & Deci, 2000), so the influence of parental involvement in this context is of particular interest. Motivation is broadly described as the process that initiates, guides and maintains goal orientated behaviours. Deci and Ryan, (1985; 2000) distinguished between different types of motivation based

on the various reasons or goals that lead to a particular action. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something that is inherently pleasurable while extrinsic motivation describes doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. Academic intrinsic or autonomous motivation can be described as the enjoyment derived from school learning with an orientation towards mastery, curiosity, persistence, task endogeny and the learning of challenging, difficult or novel tasks. Academic intrinsic motivation is of particular interest to educators and psychologists alike as it has been found to result in high levels of learning and creativity. Studies that have explored the relationship between motivation and student achievement have demonstrated the importance of the development of self-determined forms of motivation. Guay, Ratelle and Chanal, (2008) tested if students have different motivational profiles and whether certain profiles were more helpful for academic adjustment. They found that when a student had a profile of high autonomous motivation they had the most positive indicators of educational adjustment including higher achievement, concentration and satisfaction with lower absenteeism and anxiety in relation to their studies. It is thought that parents who provide praise and reassurance to their children for their efforts promoted the development of self-determined motivation (Gonzalez-De Hass et al., 2005). Children also become motivated when they see their parents take an active interest in their education so that when parents show enthusiasm for what their children are learning they are, in effect, providing a support system at home that reinforces the value of school. Marchant, Paulson and Rothlisberg, (2001) found that when students perceived their parents as valuing education and academic success, students were more motivated and perceived themselves as having higher levels of academic competence. Ginsberg and Bronstein, (1993) explored parental involvement in relation to children's motivational orientation finding that as parental monitoring or enforcing of homework increased, their child reported higher levels of extrinsic motivation in relation to the task with a greater dependence on external resources for guidance and appraisal. Additionally the teachers of these children rated them as having lower initiation, autonomy, persistence and satisfaction in completing their work. Furthermore, children who were given extrinsic rewards for their grades reported a

higher extrinsic motivation orientation in comparison to parents who rewarded their children with commendation and encouragement who were more likely to demonstrate an intrinsic motivational orientation characterised by a preference for difficult tasks, inquisitiveness and interest in learning.

Parental autonomy support refers to the assertion of a child as being unique, active and having the ability to make conscious choices or decisions and is evidenced in parental behaviours such as acknowledging the child's perspective, encouraging independent thinking as well as providing opportunities to make choices. Parental support of child autonomy predicts self-regulation, competence and achievement in education (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). By being involved in their child's education, parents communicate the value of attending school. Depending on the extent and consistency, it can aid or inhibit the process wherein a child recognises the importance of education.

#### 2.4.4 Macrosystem: The Legal System

The next layer of the EST model represents the legal system in NI, which directs and governs the duties and responsibilities of all involved in the care and education provision of LACYP. Similar to UK legislation, NI has significant legislative frameworks in place for those in its care that continue to be amended and extended as greater understanding and knowledge of the needs of looked after children evolves. By comparison the legislative frameworks for education have no specific provision for children cared for by authorities. However there is evidence that this area of the legislation is undergoing substantial review (NSPCC, 2017), reflecting the expanding knowledge and evidence base of looked after children's needs. The following outline of legislation and policy highlights the key frameworks currently in effect in NI, additional information on additional legislation and policy can be found in Appendix 13.



## **Legislation**

### **The Children's (Northern Ireland) Order (1995)**

The primary legislation for children and young people cared for by authorities is the Children's (NI) Order 1995, which sets out a legislative framework for child protection. Similar to the Children's Act (1989) which governs England and Wales, its guiding principle emphasises that the welfare of the child is paramount at all times and identifies areas of a child's life that should be given due regard:

The ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in light of age and understanding);

Physical, emotional and educational needs;

The likely effect of any change in circumstances;

Age, sex, background and characteristics which the court considers relevant;

Any harm suffered or risk of suffering;

The capacity of parents and any other person who is deemed relevant to meet the child's needs.

Parents are recognised as the best people to bring up their children but if difficulties occur, the Act stipulates that Health and Social Care Trusts must provide support to both children and their families. Action must be taken if concerns for their welfare are raised and it includes special provision for children with a disability. The Order outlines the rights and responsibilities of parents whilst also detailing the duty and power of public authorities to provide support for children. The importance of developing a partnership with parents and the necessity for meaningful partnership between the voluntary and statutory sectors is additionally outlined. Specific to children in care, authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote their welfare, provide accommodation, promote and maintain contact with the biological family; as well as providing access to services appropriate to their needs. Additional provisions are in place for children and young people leaving the care system aged 16 years or older, which specifies authorities must appoint a personal adviser for the child to assess their needs to determine the advice, support and assistance the authority should provide, and

include a leaving care plan within the young person's existing care pathway plan that should be regularly be reviewed. The Order outlines how authorities should maintain contact with care leavers; assist with their accommodation, financial matters, education and training needs until they are 21 years old.

### **The Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) (2002)**

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (2002) further extends the provisions for young people leaving care to support their transition to independent living. The Act amends the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and places new and improved duties on Health and Social Care Trusts. The primary aims of the Act are to improve preparation, planning and consistency of support for young people leaving care, and to reinforce arrangements for financial assistance. Duties of the Children's (NI) Order (1995) are extended to continue to assess and meet young people's individual needs, provision of personal advisers and the development of pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 years; this age range is extended to 25 years for those who are in further and higher education.

### **The Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (NI) (2005)**

The Children (Leaving Care) Regulations support the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) (2002). They specify the factors to be taken into account by local authorities when assessing and meeting the needs of those preparing to leave care and those who have left care. The regulations indicate the criteria for leaving and aftercare arrangements, assessment of need, the preparation and review of pathway plans, the role of personal advisers and how to assist with education, training and accommodation needs.

### **The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) (2015)**

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (2015) places a legal obligation on public authorities to co-operate with each other in order to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people. Their wellbeing is defined as:

physical and mental health

the enjoyment of play and leisure

learning and achievement

living in safety and with stability

economic and environmental well-being

the making by them of a positive contribution to society

living in a society which respects their rights

live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted between persons who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share that characteristic.

The Order specifies that all authorities must co-operate with all other children's authorities and service providers in accordance with their role to contribute to the well-being of children and young people. The NI Assembly are instructed to make arrangements for the implementation of the Order by developing a Children and Young People Strategy that sets out how it intends to improve their well-being.

### **Policy and Statutory Guidance**

#### **Care Matters (2007)**

Policy for children in care in NI is outlined in the government Care Matters policy. In recognition that outcomes for these children have not sufficiently improved, it aims to increase support by:

increasing preventative services and support to help vulnerable families stay together;

improving the range, quality and stability of placement options for children who cannot live at home;

ensuring that Health and Social Care Trusts have the necessary arrangements in place to act as effective corporate parents for children in care;

improving school and educational opportunities;

providing opportunities to take part in activities outside school and care;

strengthening the support available to young people leaving care as they transition to adulthood and independent living.

The policy also outlined how the government would seek to improve the lives of children in care which demonstrated the vision and approaches authorities would undertake to improve outcomes specific to NI. The key areas of focus were children on the edge of care, supporting families and protecting children, corporate parenting, education, life outside care and school and the transition to adulthood.

**Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, (2006-2016)**

The NI Assembly is responsible for child protection in Northern Ireland and for implementing legislation using policy and statutory guidance on how the system should work ([www.nspcc.org](http://www.nspcc.org)). In order to ensure legislation is followed, the Office for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) developed a long term children's strategy over a ten year period setting out how government departments would ensure all children and young people could fulfil their potential. The Strategy recognised that despite major investment by government over numerous decades there

was 'insufficient progress made to improve the lives of the most marginalised and disadvantaged children and young people in our society' (NI Assembly, 2006, p7).

Children and young people were identified as those below 18 years with an extension to 21 years for looked after children or children with a disability. Eight pledges were made as overarching themes to guide the policy:

The need to adopt a 'whole-child' approach, which gives recognition to the complex nature of our children and young people's lives.

Working in partnership with those who provide and commission children's services, taking account of the future arrangements following the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland.

Securing and harnessing the support of parents, carers and the communities in which our children and young people live.

Responding appropriately to the challenges we face as a society emerging from conflict and recognising that our children and young people are key to securing a more stable and peaceful future for us all.

Making a gradual shift to preventative and early intervention approaches without compromising those children and young people who currently need our services most

Developing a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives.

Ensuring the needs of children are fully assessed using agreed frameworks and common language and that the services they receive are based on identified needs and evidence about what works.

And driving towards a culture which respects and progresses the rights of the child (p17).

The implementation of each pledge was measured via a set of indicators which could be assessed to determine the government's fulfilment of these drivers for change. Overarching outcome indicators of health, economic and environmental wellbeing; enjoying, learning and achieving; positive and

valued contribution; and safety and stability were used to measure the success of the strategy. In 2015, OFMDFM published findings from these indicators to determine how well the Strategy was working. Health indicators for all children showed a significant decrease in infant mortality rates, as did dental extractions and rates of sexually transmitted infection; however there was a 31.7% increase in the number of young people waiting for their first mental health appointment in 2014 compared to 2013. Poverty and homelessness increased with 324 more declarations as homeless in 2014/15 in comparison to the previous year. Educational attainment was more difficult to measure due to changes in assessment but did demonstrate consistent improvement with 82% of pupils achieving 5 GCSE or the equivalent, with 3 in every 4 school leavers enrolling for Further and Higher Education courses. Specific to LACYP, registration on the Child Protection Register had risen by a concerning 138%, the percentage of LAC who were under 16 and living in a stable placement for the previous 12 months decreased slightly but there was an increase in formerly looked after children who were in training or further education by 23% in ten years.

While progress had clearly been made in health and education, worryingly child protection and mental health needs in young people had significantly increased, as did poverty and homelessness; suggesting much more still needs to be done. In December 2016, OFMDFM launched the draft 2017-2027 Strategy (NI Assembly, 2016), which was open to public consultation until March 2017. It aimed to build on what had been learned from the previous Strategy by focusing on both the positive outcomes achieved and the specific groups who are particularly vulnerable including LACYP. Again using the 'whole child' approach the policy outlines 'parameters of well-being are interconnected. A positive outcome in one area will lead to further positive outcomes just as a negative outcome in one area could lead to further negative outcomes. A child who feels safe and respected will go out and play more, feel healthier and be happier in school and ready to learn. A child who does not experience economic well-being and lives in poverty will be more likely to have poor health, will face barriers to play and can feel isolated, and this can affect their education' (NI Assembly, 2016, p13). There is also a continued emphasis on working in partnership with all agencies and departments

working with children and young people. To date the final strategy document has been developed but has not been published due to the political impasse of the NI Assembly since January 2017.

#### 2.4.5 Chronosystem: Changes over time

The final overarching system of the EST Model represents how the inner layers have changed and evolved over time. The historical context of children and young people who are looked after by statutory authorities demonstrates how far child protection and care has progressed in NI and the UK. Traditionally voluntary organisations such as charities or churches provided for children who were in need of shelter and protection, typically placing them in orphanages, poorhouses and workhouses. It was not until 1834 that the state assumed a statutory role in the residential care of children who had been orphaned, neglected and deprived. This initiated the evolution of the care system through recognition of the role of ‘family group’ institutions where children lived and were supervised by a house parent. These institutions included state funded homes and certified schools as well as voluntary homes run by organisations including the Catholic Church and Barnardo’s ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)). Life for these children could be regimented and included physical work, religious practice and schooling. In cases where a residential home could not be provided children could be ‘boarded out’ (fostered) by members of the community. The introduction of the Children’s Act (1948) recognised that adoption and fostering in ‘normal’ family settings were the preferential placement for children, and a cheaper alternative to the costs of running residential units. The Act specified the legal rights of children looked after by those other than their birth parents and was largely informed by the Curtis Report (1946) which had criticised the poor conditions in formal institutions and lack of training given to those who worked there. The Act also obligated local authorities to promote the welfare of children in its care ([www.childrenshomes.org.uk](http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk)). In Northern Ireland, the Children’s and Young People Act (1950) was introduced for children who were in need of care and protection and outlined the provision of a

range of services to meet the needs of children in care. Importantly, both legislative Acts were underpinned by the findings of a Welsh enquiry into the death of Denis O'Neill in 1945, while he was in the care of foster parents. Physical injuries and malnourishment identified by the coroner's report led to the conviction of both foster parents for manslaughter and neglect, but the report also identified failings by local authorities to supervise his care. This undoubtedly marked the beginning of an era of inquiries into the death or serious injury of children in the care of authorities ([www.thetcj.org](http://www.thetcj.org)). By 1971 local authorities across the United Kingdom (UK) had established Social Services departments who were tasked with meeting the needs of those in the care of the state. It also marked the beginning of significant changes in social work practice, with the development of legislation, policies and statutory guidance designed to guide social workers in the delivery of child protection and care. Emphasis was placed on professional development provided by experts in the legal, education and medical sectors, whilst also learning from past cases of organisational mistakes some of which were perpetrated by those employed to provide care (DHSSPS, 2015). This focus on appropriate preventative strategies to identify, manage and ultimately reduce abuse and neglect also began to feature as an underlying principle of social work and child care practice (DHSSP, 2003).

Despite major advances in child welfare legislation and practice in Northern Ireland, over the last number of decades the emergence of a number of public inquiries suggested that authorities have not always been able to protect children in their care. Following allegations of serious, organised child sexual abuse, the Kincora Boy's Home in Belfast was the first institution in the UK or Ireland to undergo a public inquiry in the 1980s. Three members of staff were prosecuted and convicted for a number of offences including systemic abuse over a number of years. Allegations of a cover up by authorities, whilst unproven, continue to be challenged by survivors (Skehill, 2010). Key findings from the most recent Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) published in 2017, concluded there was evidence of systemic emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children by those who were employed to care for them, by visitors and by other children. Many former looked after children in the care of authorities from 1922 until 1995 gave evidence at the inquiry and detailed harrowing



accounts of exploitation, abuse and neglect, experiences that continue to impact their lives as adults today. Recommendations from the inquiry included the issue of a public apology, financial compensation to victims and the appointment of a Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse to oversee their needs as adults. While highlighting that not all children encountered abuse, the recommendation sought to address the systemic failings of authorities and emphasised the abuse of these children and young people could and should have been detected and prevented. To date survivors have not received compensation due to the political impasse of the NI Assembly.

The societal view of children in need also changed significantly as the public became more aware of the existence and prevalence of child abuse. In the era of orphanages and poorhouses, very little attention was given to a child's needs with many suffering as a result. By comparison Northern Ireland today has some of the most comprehensive legislation for child welfare in any country driven, in part, by public anger and outcry in response to a number of high profile cases that demand greater protection of children (DHSSPS, 2015).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework of EST when applied to the education of LACYP. With the child at the centre of the model, the Microsystem represents their immediate relationships with family, siblings and peers, and their personal characteristics that influence these relationships. Difficulties are evident due to pre-care experiences of abuse and neglect, and the challenges many LACYP have in relation to their mental and emotional health. The Mesosystem is identified as the Care System that surrounds the child, their immediate relationships and characteristics. It represents the way the Care System interacts with the Microsystem in ways that should be for the benefit of the child. However it is apparent that features of the Care System such as placement type and

instability negatively impact the wellbeing of the child. Thirdly surrounding the Care System is the Exosystem which consists of the education authorities and schools in which children are educated. While the Education System has appropriate supports available for any pupil encountering problems affecting their education, LACYP may struggle due to emotional issues including attachment. Additionally they may not have experienced positive reinforcement of the need for an education. The Macrosystem outlines the significant legislative frameworks in place that govern how authorities look after those in their care, and the dearth of legislation that specifically addresses their education to ensure schools are able to accommodate LACYP needs. Overarching the EST model is the Chronosystem which demonstrates how all the systems have evolved and changed over time. Significantly it is evident that the systems surrounding the child have made meaningful progress to promote a positive developmental trajectory, but this has been as a result of major failings on the part of authorities.

The following chapter details the methodological approach used in the preceding three research studies including the design, participants and sampling procedures, ethical considerations and data analysis techniques.

## **Chapter 3.0**

### **Methodology**

### **3.0 Overview**

This chapter will focus on the overarching methodology relating to the three inter-related research studies that sought to understand why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence among post-primary LACYP. An exploratory, qualitative design has been employed for each study using one to one, semi structured interviews as the method of data collection. The rationale for this approach will be described in this chapter, in conjunction with detail on the design of the research instruments, their administration, and analysis. Considerations relating to data validation and ethics are also presented.

### **3.1 Aim and Objectives**

The overall aim of the three inter-related studies was to understand why higher rates of LACYP engage in unauthorised absence from school in NI, as existing literature has been unable to fully answer this question. Educational outcomes for LACYP are consistently poorer than their peers, and lowered school attendance amongst this group seriously impedes educational progress. By focusing on the higher prevalence rates of unauthorised absence among LACYP it was anticipated the research studies would reveal what education means to these young people, what factors influence or impact their educational experiences leading to recommendations which can inform and influence current research, policy and practice.

The key objectives of the research were to answer the following questions:

Why are there higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among post-primary looked after young people?

What does this tell us about their educational experiences?

What is helpful in addressing this problem?

What is unhelpful in addressing this problem?

## **3.2 Research Design**

### **3.2.1 Exploratory Research**

An exploratory design was chosen for this research. Exploratory research is a methodological approach that is concerned with discovery, uncovering information and generating theory (Mittal, 2010). Commonly used in education and psychology settings when an issue or topic is not fully understood, or where limited literature exists, exploratory methods are a useful means to lay the groundwork for future studies. LACYP can be a difficult group to reach due to legal and ethical considerations which prioritise safeguarding, emotional wellbeing and risk of additional harm (Mezey et al. 2015) however the exploratory design allowed the researcher to consider those who engage with this group and will have considerable insight into their lives as a way to understand why attending school is problematic.

The research design allowed for in-depth exploration of the educational experiences of LACYP from which it would be possible to determine the boundaries of their environment and identify where difficulties, opportunities or interactions of interest occur. It aimed to identify the factors or variables that are prevalent among LACYP and that impact on their school attendance and educational outcomes (Stebbins, 2001). A key benefit of the exploratory design was that it allowed for researcher flexibility (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012) so that as new ideas were generated from initial data findings, they acted as a guide for the future direction of the studies. In this respect, the exploratory approach is not intended to provide conclusive evidence, but to provide a better understanding of emergent issues and their implications for the education of LACYP.

### **3.3.2 Qualitative Methods**

The primary methodology for exploratory research is through the use of qualitative data collection. Qualitative approaches are sometimes better understood in terms of how they differ from quantitative methods. They do not collect information numerically or look for meaning in statistical variation, but rather focus on deriving meaning from narratives and descriptions. It is a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way individual's view and interpret the world in which they live and the associated experiences they have (Ritchie et al. 2013). Qualitative research is particularly effective in obtaining specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular populations. The key primary value of qualitative methodology is the opportunity to obtain in-depth information regarding an individual's subjective experience (Marks & Yardley, 2004), with unique benefits of rich, insightful data generation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Within exploratory research, several phenomena exist: Ontology, Realism and Epistemology. How the social world can be studied raises a number of philosophical issues such as what the nature of the social world represents, what is to be known about the social world, what can be learned from the social world and how this knowledge is formulated into learning. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality; its key questions consider if a social reality exists independently of human perceptions and interpretations and if there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones (Ritchie et al. 2013). The central question of ontology, then, is if social entities need to be viewed as objective (fact based and free from personal bias) or subjective (personal opinion and interpretation) (Bornstein, 1999). Realism takes the position that an external reality exists independent of individual understandings but that it can only be known by the human mind and socially constructed meanings (Hammersley, 1992), versus idealism in which the social world is made up of representations constructed and shared by people in specific contexts, or a series of individual constructs (Shaw, 1999; Blaikie, 2010).

Epistemology seeks to understand the processes of knowledge acquisition and involves considering reality in the context of what is known and how it is known. It requires the researcher to actively

reflect about how they think, and is necessary in order to distinguish between truth and falsehood as knowledge is obtained from the surrounding world (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). It is a consequence of the context in which the action of interest occurs and is influenced by the cultural, historical, political, and societal norms that operate within any given context and time. This means that reality can be different for each individual based on his/her unique understandings of the world and their experience of it (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

By acknowledging the philosophical assumptions of qualitative methods, the researcher must consider that the representation of knowledge on behalf of participants is based on their individual experiences, knowledge and how best they can articulate these. The participants in each of the three studies all presented their own unique interpretation, viewpoint and understanding of issues relating to school and education based on their subjective understanding at that point in time. Importantly, the researcher also must recognise his/her own subjective position within the study, what beliefs, values or theories influence the research direction. Subjectivity therefore can be a risk in any form of investigation meaning that findings can be skewed in a direction by the position of researcher/participant, and true empirical results are lost. In qualitative research this can be minimised by using data validation techniques, including triangulation and reflexivity that consistently challenge the subjective interpretation of data (Creswell, 2012).

### 3.2.3 Data Collection

The initial phase of the exploratory design focused on how to collect initial data in such a way that would reveal as much information as possible and that could also act as a guide for the development of the research. A quantitative method was initially considered, however, as very little is known about unauthorised absence from school among LACYP, low population size in NI and as these young people can be difficult to reach, time limits and sample size could prove problematic. Qualitative

methods were deemed most appropriate due to the population size of LACYP. By adopting a qualitative approach, this provided the option to explore issues as they were established, and to determine what variables existed that could be related to unauthorised absence from school. Instruments of data collection used in qualitative studies involve the researcher themselves where they observe and communicate by written or oral means to generate relevant data.

### 3.2.4 Participants and Sampling Procedures

The sampling method applied to the recruitment of participants for each study was purposive in nature. This approach was applied to ensure that those with direct experience of, and expertise in, unauthorised absence from school among LACYP could make a meaningful contribution to the research. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher consciously selects individuals because they have unique characteristics of interest to the study (Palinkas, 2015). Within the purposive sampling model, maximum variation sampling was applied. Maximum variation sampling is a technique used to compile a range of participants, whose perspectives will help the researcher to understand how different groups interpret the research topic (Coyne, 1997; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In this study, the participants comprised three key groups, each of which had unique viewpoints and experiences of non-attendance and who could therefore contribute diverse opinions on the overall research aim. In fulfilling maximum variation sampling, two subsets of purposive sampling were used: expert sampling in the first and third studies involved the recruitment of two groups of participants on the basis that they worked in a professional capacity with LACYP who engaged in unauthorised absence from school; homogenous sampling in the second study sought to focus on a specific participant group who were young people of post-primary school age, looked after by local authorities, and who had a history of unauthorised absence from school. Group One (Study 1) comprised of ten professional service providers from the education and voluntary/community sector. Three Educational Psychologists took part, recruited



from the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) who worked within schools in NI to identifying the educational needs of young people who may be having difficulties in school to provide advice to teachers, parents and others on the type of special help a child may need in order to learn more effectively. The Educational Psychologists provide counselling and guidance to pupils and arrange additional support such as providing counselling and guidance to the child or arranging additional support for a child in the classroom where necessary ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)). The fourth participant was a Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist who previously worked for the HSCTs in NI to provide specific therapeutic interventions such as counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy and family therapy for children and young people who were looked after by local authorities. The remaining six participants were all Project Workers who worked in the community sector within charities First Housing and Support Services and VOYPIC. Both of these charities seek to support young people in their community who are care experienced or in supported accommodation. These Project Workers worked with young people on a regular and practical basis to help them navigate key areas in their lives including education and training during and beyond care. Group Two comprised of four young people themselves who were currently engaged with the charity VOYPIC; this small sample is reflective of the difficulties reaching and engaging with LACYP because of a limited time frame and the challenging circumstances of young people. The recruitment of Group Three (Study 3) evolved during the design of the second study when the researcher became aware of the VOYPIC Mentoring Project which offered a one-to-one mentoring service to young people aged 12-18 years old who are experiencing challenges with their education and school attendance. As a group who could provide a unique perspective due to their relationship with LACYP, these mentors became the third group of participants with six taking part in total. Recruitment for Study 1 began by contacting the researcher's existing professional networks from previous employment roles, to invite them to participate in the research; snowball sampling was then used so that potential participants could identify other professionals who might also be interested in the study. In Study 2 and Study 3, the VOYPIC Project Workers initially approached LACYP and their mentors inviting them to take part; if

they agreed, they were then referred to the researcher. For the purpose of the research, young people were identified based on the DE definition of a history of unauthorised absence from school where regular attendance at school fell to 85% in any academic year ([www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk)).

### 3.2.5 Interviewing

A core method of data collection in qualitative research is interviewing participants. Interviews can take place either in a one to one setting, in a focus group, by telephone or through written text such as email, messaging, on-line forums and letters (Sutton & Austin, 2015) where the interaction occurring between interviewer and interviewee generates information which provides the raw data required (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Structured interviews involve a rigid set of questions often with yes or no answers, with limited responses and minimal options to explore issues in detail; they are often used when the topic of investigation is already well understood (Jamshed, 2014). While no interview is ever truly unstructured, the format of this type of interview is based on a general question that is guided by the respondent in any direction they so wish (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In the proceeding studies semi-structured interviews were chosen because the process allows for focus through the use of a series of open ended questions and flexibility by permitting the responses to interview questions to be explored in more depth. The researcher used a guide or schedule of questions that help to maintain the purpose of the investigation, these also permit the interviewer to probe specific issues as they arise in order to explore beyond initial responses or rationale.

The design of the interview schedule was based on 1) the research objectives and 2) who was the participant. Bryman (2004) reminds researchers that poorly constructed questions can result in bias and subsequently invalidate findings, and recommends beginning the interview with questions that are easy for the respondent to answer. These questions might ask the respondent to tell the

researcher some descriptive information about themselves; this also helps to build rapport between interviewer and interviewee, and help the respondent to feel at ease. Additionally, subsequent questions should be designed in a method that does not force the respondent to give particular answers preferred by the researcher. In the three studies of this research, the design of the interview schedule was influenced by participant type, study one and three involved adults so these questions began with an introductory question to determine some descriptive information e.g. Can you tell me how long you have worked in your profession?, followed by questions specific to the research e.g. Can you tell me about your perception of unauthorised absence from school? As the second study featured young people aged less than 18 years old, these questions were structured to reflect the age range and to gently focus on the research topic e.g. I would like to ask you if you could tell me what your experiences of attending school have been like, if that is okay? The interview schedules for all three studies were reviewed initially by the Chief Investigators, the schedules for studies two and three were additionally reviewed and piloted with VOYPIC Project Workers to ensure the format of questions were appropriate. The reviewing process was useful at this stage of the design as it allowed the research to consider the impact questions could have for participants, potentially sensitive responses and that the language used was effective in conveying the issues under investigation without leading participants.

All participants were asked identical questions within their study to maintain consistency and rigour, but the wording was suitably formed to facilitate open-ended responses, enabling participants to elaborate on issues that were important to them. This open-ended approach permitted participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desired and allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions that might reveal more about the topic. Additional questions or prompts were used that facilitated participants to clarify and fully express their viewpoint, Leech (2002) recommends these types of follow up questions to ensure clarity for the interviewer and interviewee based on the response given to the initial question. To facilitate data collection, three interview schedules were designed, consisting of four questions with options for follow up prompts (see Appendices 5, 10 &

14). Interviews typically began with a descriptive question such as ‘can you tell me about your role, school or experience?’ This allowed the interviewer to form an understanding of the participants’ particular position within the scope of the research and also enabled participants to become familiar with the researcher before exploring deeper topics. As a semi-structured format, the schedule was not rigidly applied to allow for the natural flow of the discussion, permitting participants to gradually delve deeper into reflection of experiences and perspectives that were important to them. The interviewer also guided deeper reflection using probing questions such as ‘can you tell me more about what you mean’ and ‘how did that perception come to be’. If during the interview participants moved off topic, the researcher used phrases such as ‘bringing you back to the original question....’ or ‘can we return to talk about...’ which was to ensure maximum benefit of the interview process.

One to one interviews were conducted with all participants in a private room, at a neutral location to allow participants privacy and to speak freely without the influence or distraction of others; this meant that the interviewer could also observe body language and social cues that facilitated understanding of the information provided. When conducting interviews of this type, researchers must be consistently sensitive to the needs of participants so that they remain aware of reactions or responses to questions that could indicate discomfort or distress; good ethical practice dictates that these cues will guide the direction of the interview, the need to pause the interview or, if necessary, to terminate it (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). This was most relevant to the participants in the second study who were aged under 18 years and identified as having vulnerable characteristics.

While the interview means of data collection was relevant and beneficial to the research, it was also intended that the participants would find reward in the experience. Researchers have a responsibility to facilitate the benefits of interview participation in a way that is sensitive, informed and responsive, and that puts the needs of participants before the objectives of the research (Merriman, 1988; 1998). When conducted by applying these principles, participation can induce feelings of catharsis, self-acknowledgement, sense of purpose, empowerment and self-awareness

whilst providing a voice for the marginalised or excluded (Hutchinson & Williamson, 1994; Orb, Eisenhauser & Wynaden, 2000). This was a particular consideration of the second study involving LACYP themselves that recognised young people as the experts in their own lives who had a valuable contribution to make to the research topic.

### 3.2.6 Ethical considerations

All researchers have an implicit, ethical obligation to protect their study participants from harm and to minimize the possibility of intrusion into their lives (Sanjari et al., 2014). The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) published guidelines for those engaging in educational research that recommended researchers should operate within an ethical framework of respect for any persons involved; this requires that participants should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference. This ethic of respect should apply equally to both the researcher and the participants (BERA, 2011). The guidelines specify researchers have a responsibility to ensure individuals give voluntary, informed consent before participation; they have the right to withdraw at any stage without giving reason and that specific consideration is given to protect participants from harm. Ethical consideration for this study was documented through the completion of a full research ethics application that included three individual risk assessments to evaluate any potential impact participation in the research could have on each group and to identify the best way of ensuring participant wellbeing. The risk assessments, along with the full ethical application, were reviewed by the two Chief Investigators and the University of Ulster Research and Ethics Committee, who recommended the following measures to be taken:

Confidentiality – participation in the study and information provided was treated confidentially in order to protect identity and personal privacy; this was implemented through the use of coding to identify individual participants. As it was not possible to guarantee implicit confidentiality, participants were advised that any information which suggested risk to themselves or others may need to be passed to relevant authorities as a safeguarding measure. All information that was used for the purpose of the research was stored securely on a password protected computer. This data will be held for ten years and then later destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018).

Informed consent – to ensure that potential participants were able to make an informed decision to engage in the research they were provided with an information sheet prior to participation that detailed the aim of the research, the potential role of participants, the identity of the researcher and their associated university (Appendices 3, 7 & 11). The information sheet explained what was required of the participants, provided assurances of confidentiality, clarified that participants could withdraw at any stage, even after an interview had been conducted for a maximum of one year, and how the data would be used. Young people who agreed to take part were identified as a vulnerable group due to their age (under 18 years old) and their looked after status; therefore their assent was sought (Appendix 8) which is used with participants who are old enough to understand the purpose of the study, any expected risks and possible benefits, and what their participation means. Additional consent from parents or those with parental responsibility was also obtained. (Appendix 9).

Participant wellbeing – due to the nature of the topic under investigation, participant wellbeing was paramount to each study. The risk assessments indicated that appropriate support systems should be in place for young people as vulnerable participants in case they found aspects of the interview upsetting. These support systems included ensuring all participants were advised they could stop or pause the interview at any stage without giving a reason, having a support worker on the premises

who was available throughout the duration of the interview and who could provide support to young people, if requested. Additionally, young people were given the option, prior to the interview, to state if they would like the support worker to accompany them.

### 3.2.7 Data Validity

Validity in research refers to the creditability or believability of findings (Cornball & Meehl, 1955; Roberts et al., 2006). The use of a qualitative design for this research was chosen because the strengths of qualitative methodologies are evident in the rich, descriptive quality of the data generated (Smith, 2006; Choy, 2014). However, in using this method the issue of sufficient validity has been a criticism due to the subjective nature of this type of data collection and subsequent analysis (Bryman, 2004; Burns, 2000; Noble & Smith, 2015). To counteract this criticism, face validity and content validity are regularly applied to qualitative research. Face validity is measured by considering if the means of measurement are accurate and whether they are actually measuring what is intended (Fitzpatrick, 1983; Golafshani, 2003; Johnson, 2013). Strong face validity means there is general agreement that the type of test used does accurately measure the topic of investigation (Johnson, 2013; Moores, Jones, & Radley 2012). Content validity asks if the phenomenon under investigation actually exists, and if the measurement tool used is the best way to measure it (Embretson, 2007). In this instance, researchers will typically use a test-retest method to ensure that the research measurement tool i.e. interview is a stable measurement and if the results can be replicated using a similar methodology (Joppe, 2000). Thus, internal validity is assessed by considering if the effects observed in a study are due to manipulation of the independent variable and not any other factor, in order to determine if there is a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Internal validity can be improved by controlling extraneous variables, using standardized instructions, counter balancing, and eliminating demand characteristics and investigator effects. External validity refers to the extent that results of a study

can be generalized to other settings (ecological validity), other people (population validity) and over time (historical validity). External validity can be improved by setting experiments in a more natural setting and using random sampling to select participants (Golafshani, 2003). These techniques are common in quantitative methodologies however, by comparison, qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach with methods typically including the researcher or interviewer as the data collection tool, their impact on the data obtained needs to be considered in terms of how they understand a participant's perspective and subsequently represent this during data analysis and reporting of findings. Some authors recommend the terms internal and external validity are better understood as subjectivity, reflexivity and triangulation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Winter, 2000). Therefore in order to maximise the validity of this research the following techniques were used:

### **1. Subjectivity**

As all data was collected using one to one participant interviews it was important to consider the role of the researcher within that process. As human beings, we are subjective in nature in that we make sense of our external environment based on our values at an individual, social and cultural level (Malterud, 2001). This acknowledgement means that at all stages of the research process, the impact of the researcher on the study was considered. Qualitative methodology is twofold in that it seeks to be aware of the subjectivity of the researcher and seeks to understand the subjective experience of the participant. It recognises that the subjectivity of the researcher is intrinsically implicated in scientific studies and therefore the researcher is actively encouraged to become aware of the values and objectives they bring to the data collection and interpretation process (Hammersley, 1989).



## 2. Reflexivity

Researchers are required to recognise how their background impacts their research. Professional and personal experiences will affect collection of data and interpretation of results as all researchers enter their discipline with at least some pre-conceived judgements (Giorgi, 1989). Through engaging in a process of reflexivity the investigator can begin to identify the influence of past experiences, abilities and pre-study beliefs; this process of reflection recognises the subjectivity of the researcher. Mezirow (1990) suggests there are seven levels of reflection that can help researchers become aware of personal bias and presuppositions that challenge established patterns of thinking. These were used in this research to reduce the likelihood of interviewer bias:

1. Reflectivity: self-awareness of specific perception, meaning, behaviour
2. Affective reflectivity: awareness of how the individual feels about what is being perceived thought or acted upon
3. Discriminant reflectivity: Assessing the efficacy of perception
4. Judgmental reflectivity: Making and becoming aware of the value of judgements made
5. Conceptual reflectivity: assessing the extent to which the concepts employed are adequate for the judgement
6. Psychic reflectivity: recognition of the habit of making percipient judgements on the basis of limited information
7. Theoretical reflectivity: awareness of why one set of perspectives is more or less adequate to explain personal experience.

To facilitate this practice, the researcher used a reflective journal during the data collection process to record thoughts, experiences, feelings and questions. The reflective journal permitted the researcher to become aware of herself as the research instrument, how her experiences of the

research shaped perceptions and judgements of issues raised, her response to and engagement with participants and interpretation of data collected. Ortlipp (2008) recommends the use of a journal as it allows the researcher to engage in transparency throughout the research process. The writing of a research journal is shown both to enact some potential validity criteria by producing an audit trail, whilst also recording and reflectively prompting the process of learning, interpretation and bracketing which helps to evidence transparency (Vicary, Young & Hicks, 2016). Additionally the researcher discussed and reviewed subjective perceptions emerging from the journal with senior research supervisors that allowed for exploration, challenge and critique of emerging assumptions.

### **3. Triangulation**

Typically, validation can be maximised when triangulation of data and investigator are used to enhance the quality of the study (Carter, 2014). Data triangulation is achieved by interviewing different participants to explore the same topic of interest, thereby gaining a range of perspectives on a common issue. If the same themes are emerging from each interview then this offers validation of data. Investigator triangulation can occur if the research is carried out by a collaboration of investigators; it may even be employed when the researcher conducting the interviews is independent, other researchers can be involved at different stages of the research such as data analysis that can allow inter-rater reliability to be determined (Giles, 2002). If different participant accounts of a topic share similarities and more than one researcher agrees that these similarities are present, then the interpretation can be viewed as objective and therefore validated.

Triangulation was obtained by interviewing three individual participant sample groups consisting of service providers who could provide a professional perspective of unauthorised absence from school, young people who could provide a personal perspective and mentors who had a supportive role in addressing educational issues. The interview recordings allowed for repeated revisiting of the

data to check emerging themes and that they remained true to participants' accounts. The data obtained was then reviewed by the Chief Investigators to determine if findings were comparable with significant similarities present which is a way of enhancing inter-rater reliability.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Many forms of analysis can be carried out on raw qualitative data and the approach chosen is generally based on the original research aim (Berg, 2004). For the purposes of analysing the three studies outlined in this thesis, each interview was transcribed verbatim into a written document prior to analysis. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was employed for Study 1 and Study 3 as the information provided by participants was anticipated to be factual and descriptive. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised in Study 2 as it aimed to explore the subjective experiences of young people and their thoughts and feelings about non-attendance from school.

#### **3.3.1 Thematic Content Analysis (TCA)**

The exact origins of TCA are difficult to pin point, however, Braun and Clark (2006) describe it as the corner-stone of all qualitative analysis. It is a popular approach employed by researchers, yet there is no clear agreement among authors as to how best to conduct this type of analysis (Altiwil, 2008; Anderson, 2007). TCA is broadly described as a categorising strategy for qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). Using TCA the researcher thoroughly reviews the written document, seeking out ideas or themes that emerge from the text; these are then coded or grouped into themes that accurately reflect the content of the data. This approach allows the researcher to evolve from simply reading data to a more comprehensive insight and understanding of what the data means. TCA is often used as a first step in developing an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated because theory is generated from the data rather than pre-conceptualised by the researcher. This allows the

phenomenon to emerge in its natural context before the researcher begins to interpret what the data means (Boyatzis, 1998).

Prior to data analysis, it is important to determine what constitutes a theme. Identifying a theme is ultimately driven by something relevant in the data relating to the original research question; this must present as some patterned meaning within the data set. The relevance of a theme is not reliant on the number of occurrences of that theme but rather on how well it can capture a phenomenon relevant to the overall aim of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Whilst there is a lack of clarity regarding how to conduct TCA, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) recommend six distinct phases; these were employed for the complete analysis of Study 1 and Study 3 as illustrated in Figure 3.1:

Table 3.1 Phases of TCA

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarisation with data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generate initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Search for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Review themes:	Checking the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Define and name themes:	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each

	theme, and the overall story the analysis tells;  generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Produce report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Furthermore, additional guidance suggested by Braun and Clark (2011) was applied to each of the six phases of analysis:

Phase 1: During the initial stage the researcher became immersed in the data to become familiar with the breadth and content of the transcribed interviews. This involved reading followed by re-reading in an active manner to identify meanings and patterns, notes were taken of these initial points of interest that would be returned to during the following phases.

Phase 2: Once a general list of points was made, preliminary coding began. The codes were used to pinpoint specific features of the data content which enabled the researcher to approach the data with specific questions, including those used in the original interviews. The researcher worked methodically through the entire transcripts, giving maximum attention to each area of interest and repeated patterns that could form themes. Initially, all potential themes were coded that could be useful at a later stage.

Phase 3: Once the data was thoroughly coded, the focus of the analysis changed to a broader consideration of grouping codes into overarching themes. Codes were combined at this stage with some forming key themes while others formed components within a theme. This phase was

complete when all the coded data extracts formed a collection of candidate themes and sub-themes. It was at this stage that the significance of individual themes began to be apparent.

Phase 4: This phase involved the refinement of each identified theme. Initially themes were reviewed at their coded level to confirm they formed a logical pattern. Once this was established, each theme was reviewed with reference to the entire data set, this was to ensure themes accurately reflected the evident meanings of the data as a whole; when themes did not fit, the researcher returned to earlier phases of analysis to further review and refine codes. This phase was complete when it was understood what each theme was, how each were connected and what account of the data they gave.

Phase 5: The thematic map produced through the process of the earlier phases was then defined and refined further. Each theme was considered individually and in the broader context of the entire data set. This refinement process allowed for reflection of sub-themes and if they provided structure to a complex overarching theme. This phase was complete when themes could be named and distinctly defined.

Phase 6: In the final phase, the data generated from the analysis was prepared for presentation. The write up presents the findings from the analysis in a concise, coherent and logical way so that it provides an account of the story within the data. Evidence was presented to support the identification of themes that went beyond description; evidence and the presentation of data extracts were embedded in the narrative of the data, and with reference to the original research question. In Study One, nine themes were identified, while in Study Three, five themes were identified.

### 3.3.2 Strengths and Limitations of TCA:

TCA is often viewed as a foundational form of data analysis and as an approach it has been recommended for researchers who have relatively limited experience of qualitative methodologies

(Bailey, 2008). However, TCA can also be effectively applied by an experienced researcher who can approach the data in a more informed manner, to tease out sophisticated themes and identify subtleties or nuances in the content (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Friese, 2018). As with all qualitative data analysis, a key strength of TCA is the detail within the data. It offers a rich, thick description of the topic under research and can generate unanticipated insights which due to the flexibility of the analysis, allows for social and psychological interpretations. Additionally, it allows for comparison of related studies that have used the same structure (Wilkinson, 2000). The disadvantages of TCA are important considerations but are broadly similar to those associated with other qualitative methodologies (Berg et al., 2004). For example TCA is often heavily reliant on the multiple judgements of a sole researcher and it can be difficult to choose quotations and themes that truly represent the data narrative (Millward, 2006). However, this can be addressed through robust triangulation of data, which should be employed as an intrinsic part of the entire research to maximise the validity of the study findings. In Study One and Study Three this was applied by interviewing as many participants as were available, and through the collaboration of the researcher and two Chief investigators, who all reviewed the analysis and subsequent themes.

### 3.3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a relatively recent method in qualitative research. IPA seeks to understand how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It offers an approach to analysing interview content where the focus is placed on the experiences of those being studied (Giles, 2002). Originating in psychological research, it is now commonly used in clinical psychology, counselling psychology as well as in social and educational psychology with some describing it broadly as psychology in the real world (Smith et al., 2009). Largely the work of Jonathan Smith (1996), IPA is an approach that seeks to capture the experiential

viewpoint of subjects. It recognises the role of the human predicament, focusing on real people as they engage with their world. Three key principles underpin the theory of IPA:

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of the lived experience, emphasising how individuals think about the experiences of being human. Heidegger (1962/1927) focused on what is experienced in the consciousness of an individual as they reflect on their experiences in the world. He suggested that in order to understand what human experience means to an individual, a process of transcendental reduction needs to occur where experience is reduced to singular psychological processes of perception, awareness and consciousness. Transcendental reduction offers an alternative way to consider a phenomenon of interest, by placing emphasis on the subjective, unique essence of that experience for all humans (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl (1982) furthered expanded on the understanding of the lived experience and viewed humans as always being within a specific context meaning that the activities, relationships and interactions that occur in our experienced world are relevant, relational and impact our subjective interpretation of experience.

The second key principle of IPA comes from hermeneutics which is the theory of interpretation. Originally used to provide a more solid interpretation of biblical texts, hermeneutics asks what is the method and purpose of interpretation itself, and how are the meanings or intentions of the author revealed during interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher (1998) described interpretation as having grammatical and psychological features that involve the role of objective textual meaning and the impact of the authors' characteristics. The hermeneutic circle is identified as the most meaningful concept in hermeneutic theory by Smith (2007). He describes the dynamic connection between the part and the whole that exists at multiple levels of interpretation as, "to understand the part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole you look to the part", (p.5). Yet within this process Smith advises pragmatism and the necessity of knowing when interpretation is complete. Hermeneutics offers significant theoretical insights in IPA because it explores how a phenomenon



appears to the researcher and how the researcher is involved in making sense of that appearance (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA also takes a strong idiographic approach which emphasises the importance of the detail available within individual cases, which evolve from the depth of analysis applied by the researcher. Idiography is concerned with the in-depth understandings of individuals at a case by case level and does not seek to generalise these understandings to a wider context. The psychologist Allport (1937) viewed the individuality of man as his most outstanding characteristic. This is specifically apparent in IPA, which commits to individuality on two levels; firstly commitment to the detail and secondly the context of that detail as perceived by particular people in their particular circumstance (Smith et al., 2009).

#### Conducting IPA:

From a practical perspective, IPA does not follow a prescribed methodology however Smith (2003) suggests the following four step sequence (Table 3.2):

Table 3.2 Conducting IPA

Step 1.	<u>Look for themes in the first case</u>	Reading the transcript and annotate in the left margin any significant aspects of what the participant has said. The transcript is then re-read and emerging theme titles are noted in the right margin
Step 2.	<u>Connect the themes</u>	Look for connections between the listed themes and note which cluster together. Recheck the transcript to ensure the connections work for

		the primary material. Produce a table of the themes and name as super-ordinate themes
Step 3.	<u>Continue the analysis with other cases</u>	The process is repeated with all transcripts and themes from the first case can be used to help subsequent analysis. Identify ways that each participant account is different and similar.
Step 4.	<u>Writing up</u>	The final writing up of the analysis should translate the themes into a narrative account. The findings should include emergent thematic analysis and link this analysis to existing literature.

This overall sequence offers an initial structure to the analysis process however Smith et al., (2009) further expand on the complex analytic processes involved in IPA and recommend a sequence of steps that were used as an additional framework for the researcher to use during the analysis:

#### Step 1: Reading and re-reading

This involved reading and re-reading the data where the researcher became immersed in the data focusing primarily on the participant. At this stage, the researcher was entering the participants' world and recording any observations. Repeated reading allowed the structure of the interviews to evolve as the narrative points began to bind interview sections together. This step reminded the researcher of the stages involved in the interview process, from the initial meeting between

interviewer and participant where the data generated is often broad and general, the micro-details of the topic found in the middle of the interview and the amalgamation of data that occurred at the end of the interview. The scope of the data generated at each stage was acknowledged and how trust grew between interviewer and interviewee, which was a phase of active engagement with and appreciation of the data set.

#### Step 2: Initial noting

This step of analysis explores the data content and language on an exploratory level so the researcher could begin to consider how the participant expresses, comprehends and thinks about an issue. Initial notes were taken on anything of interest and in order to produce a thorough, detailed set of notes which had a concise phenomenological focus that maintained the participant's meaning in a clear and obvious way. Exploratory comments were descriptive, linguistic and conceptual components. At this level of data immersion the researcher reflected on what words, phrases and sentences meant to both researcher and participant to engage in an analytic dialogue.

#### Step 3: Developing emergent themes

Through the process of initial noting, the researcher now had a comprehensive set of provisional notes. The focus of the next stage of analysis was to evolve these notes by developing them into emergent themes. This required the narrative flow of the interview to be broken up into discrete chunks of text and demonstrated how the hermeneutic circle manifests. The interview and noting became meaningful sections of data that were reorganised to demonstrate the psychological essence of the narrative. The themes portrayed both the participant's words and the researcher's interpretation reflecting the interaction between description and understanding.

#### Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

When a set of themes was established, it was appropriate to analyse how these themes may or may not be connected. Abstraction was used to identify patterns among themes involving matching

similar themes together to develop a super-ordinate theme. In this process, subsumption occurred when an emergent theme was recognised as a super-ordinate theme because it helped to bring together a set of emerging themes. The researcher looked for themes that had polarised relationships as well as themes that set certain contexts or pivotal moments as described in the data. Frequency of present themes was noted that signified its importance to the participant and further ground the analyst in the participant's account. Emergent themes may have specific functions within the data, i.e. the interplay of meanings that a participant presents as their meaning to a phenomenon, and the presentation of the self in the data set.

#### Step 5: Moving to the next case

When the first transcript was completed the researcher moved to the next; Steps 1 to 4 were repeated and each new transcript was approached on its own terms to allow the individuality of participants to emerge. At this stage, the rigour employed in the initial four steps encouraged the researcher's ability to allow new themes to emerge from new data.

#### Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

When each transcript was analysed individually, the researcher then began the process of comparing the themes between each. Consideration was given to connections across cases and how themes in each case expanded on the story that the data tells. This increased the depth of analysis and lead to a reconfiguring and relabelling of themes. Due to the dual quality of IPA, themes both portrayed a participant's unique interpretation of the phenomenon and the similar themes that connected into higher order or super-ordinate themes. IPA was applied to Study Two which identified four superordinate themes.

#### 3.3.4 Strengths and limitations of IPA:

Since its development, IPA has become a popular qualitative method in psychological and social sciences and its increased popularity reflects the unique contribution that this form of analysis

provides. IPA encourages the researcher to become immersed in the participant's world, yet also acknowledges that each researcher will bring their own subjectivity to the analytical process (Smith, 2015). It is a particularly useful approach when working with small sample sizes to produce case by case analysis, followed by case comparison analysis. Smith et al., (2009) recommend an optimum number of three participants for a good IPA study so, as an approach, its use can be determined by the research population under investigation and access to participants.

Despite the increased use of IPA, it is not without its critics. Pringle et al. (2011) question the validity of the interpretative processes of IPA, suggesting there will always be variation in the identification of themes both by the researcher conducting the analysis and the reader of the final report. This, they propose is due to the unavoidable subjective nature of interpretation. Furthermore, Finlay (2009) argues that the researcher's interpretations may change over time which raises further issues of how credible an analysis of this type can be. Methodological concerns have also been raised by some authors who question the flexible nature of the processes used in IPA (Giles, 2002). As previously outlined reflexivity and triangulation were both used to address these concerns throughout the research process.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methods used in the three studies, and has detailed why and how these approaches were chosen. Exploratory methods were deemed most beneficial to allow the research to naturally evolve, using qualitative interviews to collect data from three specific groups who could contribute to the understanding of why looked after young people have higher rates of unauthorised absence from school. Data validation techniques were used to maximise the strength of findings. TCA was conducted on the first and third studies as it was anticipated this data would be factual and descriptive; IPA was conducted on the second study as it involved young people

themselves, who it was presumed would provide emotional based data. The findings of the three studies are presented in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 4.0**

### **Study One: Perspectives from Service Providers**

## **4.0 Overview**

The following chapter presents findings from the first of three studies that sought to explore why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among post primary looked after young people. The first study involved service providers that represented the Exosystem within the Ecological Systems Model. These individuals worked directly with young people in a professional, educational capacity. The study sought to gauge their perceptions of this problem, why it occurs and what can help improve school attendance. The chapter details how the study was designed, how data was collected and analysed, and what participants revealed about the prevalence of unauthorised absence amongst looked after young people.

### **4.1 Background and Rationale**

Engaging in unauthorised absence from school has been identified in the Literature Review as problem behaviour among looked after post-primary pupils. Not attending school means these young people have a reduced opportunity to benefit from a full education experience that increases potential to improve their life chances and decreases the risk of vulnerability or involvement in risk taking behaviours (CCEA, 2007). Commonly identified as a frequently occurring behaviour among some looked after young people and also, in some cases, contributing to their admission into care, a key dimension of the research was to consider what unauthorised absence reveals about the lives of these young people.

As previously mentioned, a range of service providers are involved in the care of LACYP and they share a collaborative or corporate parenting role in ensuring their safety and welfare. In this study, service providers ranged across educational and clinical psychologists as well as support workers from the community and voluntary sectors whose collective remit was to engage with LACYP with a record of poor school attendance. As such, it was anticipated that these professionals would be able to provide valuable insight into the issue of unauthorised absence from school and that they would



be able to identify the context in which this behaviour occurs. Furthermore, as service providers have a duty of care to promote educational achievement, it was envisaged that they would also be able to provide information on the decision-making processes and intervention strategies that are used by authorities in seeking to reduce this behaviour.

## **4.2 Method:**

### **4.2.1 Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology with semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary source for data collection. Qualitative methodology was most appropriate in this case due to the exploratory nature of the study since its purpose was to identify why unauthorised absence occurs rather than impose preordained concepts (Smith 2003).

### **4.3.2 Participants and Sampling**

Criteria for participation in this study was purposively limited to those who had direct experience of working with a child or young person in a professional capacity who was both looked after and had a history of unauthorised absence from school. Participants were identified and recruited from the Education and Library Boards<sup>5</sup> and community sector across NI using the researcher's professional network of contacts. Snowball sampling was then used by asking these individuals if they could use their professional networks to refer colleagues who may be interested in participating in the study. A total of ten professionals working as service providers agreed to take part.

The participants in Study One all worked directly with looked after young people who had a history of non-attendance at school. Three Educational Psychologists took part and each one worked within

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<sup>5</sup> Education and Library Boards were replaced by the Education Authority on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015.  
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/education-authority>

schools in NI to identify the educational needs of looked after young people, and to provide advice to teachers, parents and others on options for help and support that would help a child to learn more effectively. The Educational Psychologists provided counselling and guidance to pupils and arranged additional support such as classroom assistance where necessary ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk)). The fourth participant was a Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist who previously worked for the HSCT in NI to provide specific therapeutic interventions such as counselling, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and family therapy for children and young people who were looked after by local authorities. The remaining six participants were all Project Workers who worked in the community sector within charities that supported young people who are care experienced or in supported accommodation. These Project Workers worked with young people on a regular and practical basis to help them navigate key areas in their lives including education and training during and beyond care. A summary of the participants is provided in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Participants' Demographic Profile.

Participant identification:	Profession:
P1	Educational Psychologist, Education and Library Board
P2	Educational Psychologist, Education and Library Board
P3	Educational Psychologist, Education and Library Board
P4	Consultant Clinical Child Psychologist, Private Sector
P5	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector
P6	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector
P7	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector
P8	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector
P9	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector
P10	LAC Project Worker, Community Sector

#### 4.2.3 Ethics

Ethical considerations were applied to this study through the completion of a full research ethics application that included a risk assessment to determine any impact of participation to service providers. The risk assessment identified the need for confidentiality, informed consent and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. As outlined in Chapter 3.0, section 3.2.6, measures were implemented to limit risks. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Ulster Research and Ethics Filter Committee on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011 (Appendix 2).

#### 4.2.4 Procedural Details

The procedure for the interviews with service providers followed the protocol set out in Chapter 3, section 3.2.5 and was reflected in the application for ethical approval. Participants who expressed interest in the project were initially contacted by email with an information sheet and consent form attached to provide them with a full description of the research (Appendix 3). Upon agreement to participate, arrangements were made for the researcher to meet with participants at their place of work for an interview or if preferred a neutral location. At the outset of the interview, the researcher explained the procedure and confirmed again that the participant was satisfied with the process. The researcher clarified any questions from the participant and provided two consent forms for the researcher and participant each to sign. The participant was given one copy of the consent form to retain for their own records and the researcher retained the other (Appendix 4). After confirming that the participant was ready to begin, the researcher activated the audio-digital recorder. Using the interview schedule, the interview commenced (Appendix 5). After approximately one hour the interview ended and the researcher thanked the participant for their contribution to the study. Participants were then asked if they could refer others to the researcher using their professional networks. The procedural process was then repeated.

#### 4.2.5 Data Analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was then conducted on each of the transcripts. As referenced in Chapter 3, section 3.3.1, TCA is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data that portrays the thematic content of interview transcripts by the identification of common themes in the text provided for analysis (Anderson, 2004). TCA was chosen as a way of developing an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, which was the service providers' perspective of the issues young people encountered; these were generated from the data rather than pre-conceptualised by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998).

TCA is described as a categorising strategy for qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). The researcher reviewed the typed interview recording transcripts, seeking out ideas emerging from the text that were then grouped into themes. This allowed the researcher to evolve from simply reading the data, to a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings within the data. Prior to data analysis, it was important to determine what constitutes as a theme. Themes were identified because they captured something relevant in the data relating to the original research question; this presents as some patterned meaning within the data set. The relevance of each theme was not necessarily reliant on the number of occurrences, but on how well it captured a phenomenon relevant to the overall aim of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

TCA was applied based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarisation with the data by reading and re-reading, noting down initial ideas, grouping interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating groups into potential themes, then generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Analysis of the data in Study One using TCA generated nine themes, each with a composite of sub-themes. A summary of the themes and sub-themes generated is presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Description of themes and sub-themes

Themes and Sub-Themes	Description
<b><i>Negative school experiences</i></b>  Sub-themes Struggling socially Stigma Need for privacy Emotional difficulties	Young people were described as having persistent negative experiences with their peers while in attendance at school. These included the stigma associated with being in care and the lack of privacy in relation to their personal circumstances. For some young people, they struggled with social relationships in school and had difficulties managing their emotions. The accumulation of these negative experience resulted in young people not wanting to attend school because of these unpleasant and unwanted associations.
<b><i>Different priorities</i></b>  Sub-themes Family contact Moving home Emotional needs	Service providers identified that education generally, and attending school specifically, was not a priority for the young people they worked with. Instead, the immediacy of their current circumstances, such as having to move home, uncertainty as to when they would see their family again and the emotional impact of this became pre-occupying concerns.
<b><i>Vicious circle</i></b>  Sub-themes Self-fulfilling	Many young people were described themselves as trapped in a vicious circle of non-attendance. Missing out on lessons, difficulty in catching up with course work and the likelihood of reprimand from the school meant that the cycle of not

prophecy	attending became a self-fulfilling prophecy.
<b>Care environment</b>  Sub-themes Residential care Foster care	Service providers considered that placement type in the care environment had a strong influence on the behaviour of young people, with those in residential care at greater risk of non-attendance compared to those in more stable foster home settings.
<b>Lack of motivation</b>  Sub-themes Influence of biological family Residential staff	Service providers perceived that many young people simply did not have any motivation to attend school. In part, this lack of motivation was often as a result of the influence of biological family members who did not value education.  Furthermore, for many young people living in residential care, it was perceived that residential staff members did not focus on their education as a priority or in ways that would motivate them.
<b>Unproductive pastimes</b>  Sub-themes Sleeping Hanging around Negative activities	When not in school young people were described as spending their time in unproductive behaviours that perpetuated their non-attendance. This included sleeping during the day, hanging around with others who also were not at school and, for some, engaging in negative and high risk behaviours.
<b>Needing support</b>	The service providers shared the view that all young people needed consistent support to manage the emotional and academic demands that attending school

Sub-themes Emotional Support Academic Support Others to take an interest	required. They also recognised that significant adults taking an interest in their young people's education had a crucial motivational role.
<b><i>Reframing priorities</i></b> Sub-themes Emotional needs first Education second	When addressing educational issues, service providers identified that the emotional needs of young people needed to take priority. It was acknowledged that in reality until these needs were properly addressed and managed effectively, education could not be a priority..
<b><i>Angry reactions don't help</i></b> Sub-themes Service provider responses Schools response	Participants indicated that the negative reactions – from both school and service providers - which accompanied unauthorised absence from school, were not helpful and did little to address the underlying issues of looked after young people. These were viewed as compounding the problem further.

### 4.3 Findings

This section presents each theme and sub-theme in more detail, with quotes from service providers to illustrate key points.

#### 4.3.1 Negative school experiences

All of the service providers explained that attending school was not a pleasant experience for young people because of the negative views some pupils and teachers had of them, and due to difficulties they had socially. These circumstances made their school experience less enjoyable and made it less likely that young people wanted to be there or stay there, as illustrated in the following quotes:

Participant 1a: *...they don't fit easily into classrooms where there is a lot of conformity and where they don't feel particularly valued and where they tend to be viewed quite negatively where they view themselves quite negatively...and therefore don't have a very positive view of the experience...*

Participant 1d: *...they go into a formal institutional type setting like education and are perhaps not succeeding very well there...there's an aggregate of experience if you like that is negative and so they're not succeeding at school...*

#### Social Challenges

All the service providers explained how young people faced a range of social challenges every time they entered the school premises, particularly in their interactions with peers. Often, they found it difficult to make and retain friendships since their individual self-perceptions of being different and the emotional stress placed on them because of their unconventional circumstances made every day social interaction difficult. Consequently, service providers considered that the social challenges associated with attending school lead young people to view it as a hostile, stressful environment rather than one where they felt they could flourish and succeed as the following quotes illustrates.



Participant 1j: *...the bottom line is would you go somewhere everyday where you feel a failure and embarrassed and knew that you didn't know what everybody else knew and knew you were being talked about and there is nobody on your side and you're asking that of the most unsupported vulnerable group in society...?*

Participant 1d: *...a lot of looked after children struggle socially at school...*

These challenges often meant that when young people were at school they did not have many friends, a situation often related to difficulties in forming trusting relationships with others:

Participant 1g: *...they might not always have had a huge amount of close friends at school as they didn't get on with that peer group...there's people in the class that they don't get on with...they maybe have that problem where they're not able to make good relationships or trust people...*

### Stigma

In the interviews, some service providers elaborated that a key reason why LACYP struggled socially at school was due to the stigma associated with being looked after. As one interviewee stated:

Participant 1d: *...they also go in there with stigma...they have a number of stigma if you like they're not very well off because they haven't come from middle class very often middle class professional backgrounds but also they've been rejected or abandoned by their families...*

The service providers also perceived that the stigma of being looked after could lead others to have negative views of these young people and to see them as separate or different to their peers. In particular, the circumstances of a chaotic family background, the status of being or becoming a looked after child and the obvious differences in daily practicalities were identified as cumulative factors which, if identified by other pupils, could frequently lead to social rejection:

Participant 1h: *...it's very difficult for young people to have friends especially if they have that whole care background...*

### Need for privacy

Due to the difficulties in their personal lives, service providers confirmed that privacy was very important for looked after young people. This need for privacy was closely linked to the stigma of being looked after, where young people did not want peers to be aware of their circumstances because of the impression it could create and the questions it might generate, as this quote illustrates.

Participant 1f: *...there's no doubt in my mind that she didn't want to tell anyone that she was living in supported accommodation...*

However, maintaining privacy was difficult to achieve in the school environment and service providers indicated that the status of being a looked after young person often became public knowledge so that peers quickly became aware of a different home context and would ask lots of questions that were intrusive to the privacy of these young people. The impact of this was both unsettling and uncomfortable, meaning that many LACYP preferred to avoid these types of potential scenarios, as one provider described:

Participant 1e: *... they go into school everybody knows your business people ask you questions and I think that if you were in care or even if you were in a foster home children knew very quickly you were in care...you either had to stand up for yourself and be different so that you could survive everybody knows your business...*

### Emotional difficulties

The emotional difficulties experienced by looked after young people were identified by service providers as having a contributory role in their negative experiences of school:

Participant 1a: *...it is likely that school as it is at present doesn't meet the need of a lot of young people who are looked after because they've had disturbed damaged lives and they don't fit in easily into classrooms where there is a lot of conformity...*

Service providers reported that the impact of pre-care and care experiences have immediate and longer term emotional consequences that can impact in a range of ways. For example, the circumstances leading to, and the experience of being in care strongly determined the level of difficulty interacting with peers and teachers in school where an acquired mistrust of others impacted negatively on these relationships.

Participant 1b: *...looked after children they do have attachment issues...most of them will have by definition some sort of attachment issues which make it more difficult for them to relate to figures in life to help them be more relaxed so it will affect their self- esteem so would make them more likely to be hyper vigilant...*

Service providers attributed emotional difficulties to poorly developed social skills caused by their early developmental experiences. Emotional difficulties prevented these young people from fully recognising and managing their emotions, navigating social situations and developing bonds with others.

Participant 1d: *...they struggle for all sorts of reasons because they've missed out to some extent in the socialisation process in other words an experience in life that equips them for forming relationship eh mediating relationships and managing relationships...*

### 4.3.2 Different Priorities

Many of the service provider participants identified that education and school attendance was simply not a priority for a lot of looked after children. Service providers perceived that the young person's personal circumstances distracted them at this particular point in their lives so that their attention, focus and energy was directed on processing and making sense of this unfamiliar environment as these participants explained:

Participant 1e: *...school was the least thing on their agenda...that was really the last thing in their head...*

Participant 1i: *...depending on the circumstances of the young person it depends what's really going on inside their head it depends what is going on in their life at that moment and going to school isn't a priority...*

One participant vividly described the experience of a looked after young person to demonstrate how the technical procedures of the care system and corporate parenting could impede meaningful school attendance and effectively de-prioritise education at key points in that young person's life:

Participant 1j: *...she was living in a residential unit but she thought she was going to be moving home to be with her mother again...I was literally in the room when the staff came into the room and said to the young person eh your birthday is at the weekend and just to let you know we're going to have to see about getting you moved out into the community...suddenly the rug was pulled...she knew long term that education was going to help her but at that particular moment that specific day it wasn't the priority...it's the immediacy of other priorities...where they all live can change in a minute...they understand the importance of education but education is a process not an event and events overtake their educational process...*

### Family contact

Some service providers identified that many young people were often preoccupied with the difficulties of their family circumstances, where inconsistencies in contact with parents, siblings or other family members and uncertainties about future contact had more immediate importance as these views suggest:

Participant 1g: *...if they had other issues going on like family issues family contact that sort of thing or if they had important meetings coming up education just wasn't important to them...*

Participant 1f: *...the biggest issue for her was that she didn't have a mother or father there...*

Participant 1h: *...they've got all this shit at the back of their heads you know what if my mummy and daddy don't love me am I going to be able to go back home again...*

### 4.3.3 Moving home

For some looked after young people, movement between different placements whilst in care can be a common occurrence and service providers considered this disruption a destabilising experience that made settling into school difficult, particularly since a change of placement often meant that young people would be starting a new school.

Participant 1h: *...because they've just moved and they've had to move away to start a new school which is where it mostly comes from having to start a new school...*

These changes seemed to be a particularly stressful experience for looked after young people as they had to cope with the dual demands of a new living environment as well as attending a new school where they would have to adjust to a new environment and new peers.

Participant 1a: *...they moved areas they had moved to a residential unit and also had to go to a new school and that was going to be quite difficult for them...*

### Emotional needs

Service providers agreed that, for many young people, their emotional needs took greater priority over education and school attendance. They agreed that personal circumstances had a significant emotional impact on the lives of looked after young people and that coping with their emotional needs limited their capacity to focus on meaningful school attendance.

Participant 1i: *...he won't go to school he doesn't go to school just basically he is so sad and upset...he would miss a lot of school he's so down and getting washed you know the basic things that you do every morning he doesn't do them it's hard for him to do that...*

Participant 1g: *...they just woke up that morning and they weren't going to go they were just feeling a bit down...*

One service provider described young people as trying to survive emotionally due to the devastating impact of the breakdown in their family circumstances, which suggested a high level of emotional turmoil:

Participant 1d: *...surviving is their top priority in the situations that they find themselves...they're much more tied up with who loves me who cares about me what value do I have as a human being...*

### 4.3.4 Vicious circle

Many service providers described their young people as being trapped in a vicious circle: non-attendance at school and difficulties settling in led to unauthorised absences which meant they fell behind with their school work. The subsequent pressure to catch up on missed course work and potential consequences of disciplinary action meant that non-attendance could quickly become an

established pattern. These factors did not occur in isolation so their collective impact contributed to a cycle of continued non-attendance which made returning in the future much more difficult as these service providers described:

Participant 1d: *...once they start missing out on education either by lack of concentration or failure to attend you know it becomes a vicious circle in a sense and catching up is so difficult...*

Participant 1e: *...either way you end up in bother because you didn't want to be in school so I think it's a whole vicious circle...*

#### 4.3.5 Care Environment

The care environment that young people lived in was identified by service providers as having an influential role on their behaviour. In particular, their interactions with peers and adults could either serve to motivate them to attend school or encourage their non-attendance. Noticeably, interviewees identified a difference between those in residential care and those in foster care:

Participant 1a: *...there is a difference between children in residential care and children in foster care that might also be due to the nature of the children those children in residential units might be harder to place in foster care and therefore more likely to refuse to attend school...*

##### Residential care

Interviewees indicated that for young people living in residential care, the behaviours of their peers could be strongly influential. For example, it was suggested that if a young person observed a trend of non-attendance in another young person, this led them to question their own attendance and could instigate a pattern of unauthorised absence:

Participant 1g: *...it would have been they would've copied each other so if one person didn't go to school the other person didn't go to school so it could have been a bit of copying behaviour...*

Participant 1i: *...in children's homes if one young person doesn't go to school it's sort of like a domino effect that's a big experience that I've seen...*

### Foster care

Whilst few service providers described working with young people who were placed in foster care, those who did recognised it as a better living environment and viewed it as a place where young people's non-attendance was potentially less likely. For these service providers, foster care seemed to offer a less chaotic environment and represented a stable placement where young people felt nurtured and cared for:

Participant 1g: *...the foster placement there's less children there as well and they're at different ages and different behaviours there's natural children there as well and it's more kind of nurturing surroundings...*

Participant 1b: *...if they're in a more stable environment things are settled...*

### 4.3.6 Lack of motivation

Many of the service providers described their young people as lacking motivation to go to school; they did not see the purpose of attending school and did not have aspirations to succeed academically. They did not view school or education as important nor as something that would help them in their adult lives. The interviewees attributed this lack of motivation to the influence of significant others in the young people's lives. In the absence of encouragement or inspiration to attend school, the value of education lost importance as outlined below:

Participant 1e: *...they didn't see the relevance of why you needed to be at school to get exams, to have a job, career...*



Service providers perceived that lack of motivation in looked after young people was, in part, influenced by their parents who, for a variety of reasons, did not value education or the life chances it could offer. Since many young people did not have family members who had meaningfully or consistently engaged in education the absence of a positive role model was a de-motivating influence as these interviewees explained:

Participant 1i: *...for parenting reasons there wouldn't be a good push from home for parents to push them to get up in the morning or to give them that motivation to get up and ready and have their uniform sitting ready different things like that...*

Participant 1g: *...it's kind of part of the family none of them really attended school and they weren't really encouraged by their carer...*

Participant 1e: *... but a lot of the times their parents weren't in a position to provide them or even wanted to stimulate them in any way around their education usually there was drink related problems and that was the last thing that anybody who is drunk wants to do is sit down and do homework or anybody who's got a lot of issues themselves they don't maybe see the point or maybe they never had one of their parents look about their educational needs...*

Interestingly, some service providers were critical of staff members in residential units who, they felt, were too busy taking care of the daily practicalities of looking after the young people in their care. It was felt that the behaviour of residential staff did not adequately motivate young people to engage in education and that as staff they lacked interest in promoting education amongst those they were caring for:

Participant 1a: *...I find children's homes they want children to be at school because it gets them out of the way during the day but they don't have a great interest or respect for the children being educated...so they're not so worried about the education so much as they're worried about getting them away for the day...*

Participant 1e: *...staff could have been more responsible around homework but children didn't weren't pushed inspired or encouraged...*

Participant 1b: *...they're more worried about the looking after...*

#### 4.3.7 Risk taking behaviours

It is a given that if young people are attending school it will account for a large percentage of their time, whilst non-attendance means that they had to find other ways of passing their day that also lacked the structure of a daily routine. All service providers described this empty time as, at best, unproductive where young people would either sleep during the day or hang around with peers not doing very much:

Participant 1d: *...they're usually not engaged in highly productive activities...*

At worst, they recognised that young people were engaging in risk taking or antisocial behaviour that could have lasting consequences for their future.

#### Empty hours

Most participants described their young people as often hanging around parks or town centres during the school day which meant that they were not engaged in any activity that was productive, enjoyable or motivating.

Participant 1d: *... they're hanging around street corners and they usually don't go to libraries to read books they usually are hanging about with other kids who are also engaged in unauthorised absences...*

Participant 1i: *...around the house doing nothing or out in the streets with their friends about the town you know just doing anything but going to school...*

For some young people who were not going to school, their days lacked the structure and routine associated with attending school. These young people passed time by sleeping or staying in bed during the day time.

Participant 1i: *...they'd be in bed all day or most of the day sleeping...*

Participant 1f: *...sleeping that would be the case in my experience...during the day when they're not going to school they're sleeping...*

Worryingly, some participants described their young people as passing their day by engaging in activities that placed them at physical risk and that could have lasting consequences for their future prospects. These activities included criminal behaviour, alcohol and substance abuse, self-harm or sexual activity.

Participant 1h: *...they'd be drunk or they'd be found by the police were out shop lifting or they were doing things that they shouldn't be doing like breaking into places...*

Participant 1c: *...shoplifting...*

Participant 1e: *...messing around messing around could have been getting themselves into situations where they're out drinking they're having sex for some they're out stealing for others it was all self-destruct really...some of them would've sat and self-harmed or would've sniffed and got really high...*

#### 4.3.8 Needing support

All service providers described the importance of individualised support for their young people in all aspects of their lives. In particular, emotional and academic supports were identified as being of benefit in relation to school life. These supports were a key feature of the work that service providers undertook with their young people; principally, it involved empathising with the situations that young people found themselves in and acknowledging how challenging their lives were.

### Emotional Support

Service providers recognised there was a strong need to provide emotional support for looked after young people that included understanding the challenges they faced in relation to school. They agreed the importance of having any small steps and successes acknowledged and celebrated. They perceived that this type of emotional support helped young people by raising their self-confidence; at the same time, providing reassurance that a support mechanism was available seemed to buffer difficult events. Young people also benefited from knowing that there was someone there on their side that could appreciate and understand their circumstances:

Participant 1g: *...a lot of praise a lot of support...recognising that they're going recognising that it's not always their top priority too that kind of thing supporting them encouraging them letting them know that you understand letting them know that you know it's not their top priority...*

Participant 1i: *...raising young people's self-esteem confidence has been a good intervention with the young people in my experience...*

Participant 1e: *...when people were giving them some kind of praise it worked well for them...*

### Academic support

It was suggested that support measures put in place regarding attending school were helpful. These measures included helping a young person become familiar with their school environment and teaching staff. Additionally, if the young person had missed parts of their school work then additional tutoring was recognised as a beneficial option. These forms of academic support seemed to function by identifying and seeking to remedy some of the barriers that a young person may have been challenged by or dissuaded by, on returning to school:

Participant 1j: *...some extra support if they're going back into school where they academically might have missed so some sort of support to bridge that lack of knowledge...some sort of familiarisation*

*process of going back into school can help like you're inducted into a new job some sort of induction process schools having maybe somebody...visits just like a younger child going to school they meet the teacher before they start...*

#### Others taking an interest

All participants described the most basic support they could provide to their young people was to simply take an interest in what they were doing in school. This served to demonstrate that as service providers they did care, they valued what each young person had to offer and they wanted them to succeed in education. By taking an interest, service providers were actively seeking to motivate young people:

Participant 1i: *...just by having that one minute thirty second conversation well did you go to school every day this week just having that conversation encourages them and motivates them to go...*

Participant 1h: *...if I was a young person I would want to be asked how your day was at school did you have a good day...saying things like well what homework have you...*

One participant described how he demonstrated his genuine interest in the life of the young person he worked with, by attending an important event in her school life on his day off. In doing so he was effectively conveying to this young person that her education mattered:

Participant 1f: *...I went to parent teachers meetings on behalf of her to see what was going on but by me actually going physically doing this on my day off to help and assist her going over and above what you're supposed to do in terms of your hours that certainly had a big impact...making her believe that I was doing everything I could and really cared about her life...*

#### 4.3.9 Reframing priorities

Many participants had previously described how attending school was not a priority for their young people and they recognised that often other priorities had to be dealt with first before education could even be considered. This re-framing of priorities demonstrated that although education mattered and outcomes could be enhanced through regular attendance, meeting the immediate emotional needs of looked after young people was a pre-requisite for a more meaningful and potentially more productive school experience:

Participant 1a: *... you have to reframe it for them and say now these years for you are when you learn to cope better with social situations and get on with people better and then after that you can look at those sorts of things...*

Participant 1d: *...in terms of helping them engage in education I think what they need to do is be engaged as people first of all...it's about helping them make some sense of their lives to have options and more options...*

#### 4.3.10 Angry reactions don't help

An important acknowledgement made by all service providers was that responding to young people who were not attending school in a negative way did not help the situation. Participants believed that many current strategies are ineffective and can often make a bad situation worse. These strategies typically include sanctions such as suspension and exclusion. However, it was generally acknowledged that verbally chastising a young person or using punishments such as being grounded has had little impact in making these young people want to go school.

1b: *...there doesn't seem to be proactive things where people are trying to get involved prior to things and stopping them from happening...*

### Response of service providers

Service providers recounted that when a young person missed school, a negative response to this behaviour did not resolve the underlying issues of why they did not want to attend. In this respect, using force or threats such as getting angry and using discipline did not lead to productive results because they undermined the relationships service providers had with young people whose reasons for not attending school were based in genuine circumstances. Interviewees highlighted the need to support young people to address the issues they had in the school environment, such as the stigma of being looked after and challenges with peers:

Participant 1d: *...what is unhelpful is that instant judgement...it's understandable it's instinctive and it's very human to react that way but it's not helpful so that sort of knee jerk response...*

Participant 1j: *...threat doesn't work I think threats and being told that they have to is the main thing that doesn't really work it's carrot and stick and the stick seems to be used rather than the carrot...*

### Response from schools

Some participants found that the way in which schools responded to the problem of unauthorised absences did not help to resolve the matter either. They described a school tendency towards reactive responses whereby the young person would be disciplined often by suspension. Participants agreed this did not acknowledge or deal with the underlying issues in any meaningful way and frequently appeared to further complicate rather than ameliorate the issue of non-attendance:

Participant 1b: *...I think the discipline policies that schools have the excluding and suspension procedures are very much reactive strategies you wait until you do something wrong and you get a punishment for it...*

Participant 1g: *...you would have schools that would be a bit heavy handed maybe suspend them a bit too quickly you know for mitching...being too heavy handed from anybody's point of view would be detrimental to them...being treated too severely has that negative impact on them...*

#### **4.4 Discussion**

Existing literature has provided a significant contribution to the educational challenges experienced by children and young people in care; however the issue of non-attendance has, so far, been given little attention. The current study therefore offers original in-depth insight into the lives of looked after young people by highlighting those factors that contribute to their unauthorised absence from school. In many respects, the circumstances that service providers describe portray a bleak picture of these young people in relation to their school attendance. When meeting a looked after young person for the first time, service providers are presented with a range of challenges that need to be addressed on multiple levels if they are to succeed in re-engaging their young people in some form of educational engagement. As the findings reveal, the natural reality must be accepted that, for some, their emotional needs by necessity have to take priority over their education. Engagement in unauthorised absence from school among the young people, as described by the participants in this study, is not simply about undesirable behaviour. Whilst this behaviour undeniably presented associated risks, importantly, it reveals a considerable amount of insight into the frequently unstable lives of looked after young people; their non-attendance can, in effect, be an expression of the unhappiness they feel in the school and home environments. Previous research on truancy has also revealed similar findings (Attwool, 2006; Rivers, 2010; Sutpen, Ford & Flaherty, 2010); however, the current study goes beyond these insights to show it is a complex and multi-layered combination of factors that can impact individually and collectively. By identifying those specific factors that contribute to the unhappiness and disaffection that leads young people to disengage from education, and therefore by addressing these individual factors not only establishes a context for



unauthorised absence from school but provides a basis from which to identify potential remedial interventions.

The key findings in the study relate to the negative experiences young people are having when they attend school, having more urgent priorities than education, being trapped in a vicious circle of not attending of which the consequences compel young people to continue not attending. Additionally the impact of the care environments that young people are placed in, a lack of motivation to engage in education and having unproductive pastimes when not in school, are identified as key challenges. Young people were described as needing a high level of consistent support emotionally and educationally; in response service providers suggested priorities may need to be reframed with emotional needs superseding education and finally that negative responses to this behaviour are of no benefit in resolving the issue. These findings will be discussed in relation to existing literature and policy, along with limitations and future directions of the study.

#### **4.4.1 Negative experience when attending school:**

Young people were described as having generally negative experiences while in attendance at school; in addition, they associated school with difficult interactions their peers. The school environment plays a key role in the socialisation of children and is the primary context where children acquire and express peer competences (Gallagher, 1993). Attending school presents pupils with a platform where they develop not only academic skills, but also the social skills that prepare them for future life. School is a crucial testing ground for social interaction competences that typically follow a pupil throughout their life. For a young person who is living within the care system, navigating this environment can be particularly challenging since their social interactions are often negatively impacted due to the barriers their particular circumstances present.

It has long been recognised that pupils who struggle socially at school perform less well than their peers academically (Coolahan, et al., 2000). Typically, pupils who experience peer rejection in the classroom exhibit higher incidences of disengagement and behaviour problems such as negative attitudes towards school and school avoidance. Peer rejection has been found to be a strong predictor of pupils' readiness to learn and motivation to achieve (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006). The exact mechanisms of such rejection are difficult to define; however, Buhs and Ladd (2001) suggest that, where pupils are denied the opportunity to fully participate by their peers, they engage less in lessons and other school activities as a result of this social isolation. Furthermore, pupils who are harassed by their peers are also more likely to avoid the contexts in which the harassment or rejection occurs through recurrent school avoidance. These scenarios would seem to be a common occurrence for looked after young people who, by engaging in unauthorised absence from school, are actively seeking to avoid the distressing environment that school presents to them. Avoidance behaviours are adopted to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes. However, it is well documented that avoidance of anxiety inducing situations often maintains and heightens the original anxiety (Gangemi et al., 2012; Salkovskis, 1999; Thwaites & Freeston 2005). Research suggests that empirically based and systematic approaches that seek to address the specific factors that create the anxiety are better placed to have a long term benefit (Kearney, 2008). Therapeutic interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy and other forms of counselling are known to improve attendance, but not in isolation. These approaches must be supported in the home and school environment that recognise the role of, parents and siblings, peers and teaching staff in either contributing to or reducing anxiety (Elliott, 1999; Ginsburg et al., 1995).

The stigma of being 'looked after' is one barrier that this group of young people regularly face in social contexts and it is a challenge that appears to be of significance in the school setting. Having a 'looked after' status can often be perceived by others as representing problem children or as risk-of-offending behaviour (Garret, 1999), and there is rarely publicity that portrays care experienced young people in a favourable manner (Hunt et al., 2008). Stigma is a phenomenon which has a

substantial impact on those tarnished by negative connotations; they are usually viewed by others to possess an attribute or have an association with something that is deemed unfavourable. Stigmatisation occurs when labels, negative stereotyping, discrimination and exclusion are applied in power situations that enable these opinions or behaviours to be expressed and reinforced (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Studies have shown that individuals affected by stigma have increased levels of poor mental health, poor physical health, educational underachievement and low socio-economic status as well as reduced access to adequate housing and employment opportunities (Corrigan, 2004; Link, Yang, Phelan & Collins, 2004; Yinger, 1994).

Looked after young people often describe a need for privacy in relation to their personal circumstances (Munro, 2001); this can be difficult to maintain when stigma or stereotypes persist in the attitudes and behaviours of others. The reality is that for children and young people in care the daily structure of their lives are different to those of most of their peers, often involving a range of adults and unexpected changes in living arrangements. Even the most basic discussions among peers can reveal more information than a looked after young person may want others to know, contributing to pressures and challenges in social contexts of trying to maintain privacy but also develop friendships and fit in with peers. Martin and Jackson (2002) found that in a group of care leavers who had succeeded in education, 'being like other people' was highly important in relation to school life, where being viewed in the same way as others was the biggest emphasis. Looked after young people often describe a need for privacy in relation to their personal circumstances (Munro, 2001); this can be difficult to maintain when stigma or stereotypes persist in the attitudes and behaviours of others. The reality is that for children and young people in care the daily structure of their lives are different, often involving a range of adults and unexpected changes in living arrangements. Even the most basic discussions among peers can reveal more information than a LACYP may want others to know, contributing to pressures and challenges in social contexts of trying to maintain privacy but also develop friendships and fit in with peers. Martin and Jackson (2002) found that in a group of care leavers who had succeeded in education, 'being like other people' was

highly important in relation to school life, where being viewed in the same way as others was the biggest emphasis.

The emotional characteristics of children in care can also contribute to and result as a consequence of poor social relationships. Social competence naturally evolves within emotional relationships (Hartup, 1989) but emotional disorder can impede this process. The ways in which emotional disorder are expressed can determine how social interaction fails. In particular, unsociable or aggressive children are more likely to experience peer neglect, withdrawn children experience more occurrences of peer rejection while children perceived as sad or depressed experience both peer neglect and rejection (Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Dodge et al., 2003; Ladd, 1999). Attachment issues that contribute to emotional difficulties among looked after young people are common and are evident in the school environment. Studies have shown that parental attachments strongly influence the relationships that children develop with their peers (O'Connor & McCartney, 2006). Students with secure peer attachments typically demonstrate higher motivation levels, academic success and pro-social behaviours whereas students with insecure peer attachments were more likely to engage in problematic behaviours with typically lower academic achievement (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Jacobsen & Hofmann, 1997). Attachment styles have also been associated with various behavioural outcomes that can influence educational outcomes. There is a growing wealth of literature that supports the relationship between attachment and the development of behaviour problems at school (Belsky & Nezworski, 2015; LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985; Crowell & Waters, 2005; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). Secure attachments have been associated with higher levels of social competence and self-regulation in the school setting with children rated as having insecure attachments demonstrating more frequent occurrences of aggression, anxiety or withdrawn behaviours (Waters, Hamilton & Weinfield, 2000; Moss et al., 1998).

Within the insecure classification of attachment, children with disorganised or controlling styles have been most closely associated with problem behaviour in the classroom predominantly of an

aggressive nature (Hein et al., 2015; Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks & Cibelli, 1997). Attachment theory posits that the controlling behaviour of the insecure child may develop to contain frightening parental behaviour that can then lead to conflict with peers or teachers within the classroom setting (Belsky & Nezworski, 2015; Greenberg et al, 2003). Furthermore children with an insecure avoidant or ambivalent attachment may demonstrate symptoms of an internalising nature such as anxiety, social withdrawal and depression (Moss et al., 1998).

#### **4.4.2 Different Priorities**

Family contact was identified as one area of concern for looked after young people and this issue has generated a growing debate due to the complexities that family contact presents. From a legislative perspective, family contact for children looked after away from their family is deemed important for their psychosocial development (Children's (NI) Order, 1995), however, this contact can often present challenges for young people (Triseliotis, 2010). The issue of family contact must always be co-considered alongside the reasons why a young person becomes looked after. For some young people, separation from family members generates anxiety and sadness that may include a longing to be reunited and, in these cases, it can be exceptionally challenging for children and young people to understand why they are unable to return home. For others, particularly those who have experienced abuse, family contact may not be desired and may even be feared. Macaskill (2002) found that, in certain situations, contact invoked painful emotions in children while Sinclair et al. (2005) reported that in cases of abuse, contact could lead to placement breakdown and even further abuse. Family rejection can be evident during contact also, particularly if there is little hope that family members will ever be able to provide adequate care to children. In these cases, contact has been found to be of little benefit (NSW, 2005). From the perspective of service providers, family contact issues appeared to place an emotional demand on the young people described in this study, that distracted them from other aspects of their life, regardless of the context of that contact.

Moving home and changes of residential placement have long been recognised as a problematic feature of the care system that does little to increase the needed stability and security for young people in care. The initial move from the family home into a care placement can be a traumatic experience for many children and young people and as described by one participant in this study (Participant 1j), placement changes can be sudden and often unanticipated by the young person. Moving home as an adult is recognised as being highly stressful even when it is desired, yet for these young people moving home can become a common occurrence that is often accompanied by huge emotional distress due to the uncertainty of their living arrangements and the breakdown of their previous placement (O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007). Frequent placement changes can be viewed as abuse in itself (NICE, 2006) however despite significant emphasis on this feature of the care system by policy makers (NICE, 2013; Ward, 2011) the problem remains.

In psychological theory, stress is defined as the relationship between an individual and their environment that is evaluated as exceeding their personal resources or as presenting a particular threat to their well-being. Appraisals of stressors occur as a result of perceived situational demands versus perceived coping resources (Lazarus, 1991; 2000). In the case of the young people described in this study, their coping resources have been focused on managing issues where there is a high degree of emotional demand. The challenges they face can be viewed as forming a hierarchy where the most urgent problems need to be dealt with first (such as family contact and placement) before constructs deemed as less important can be addressed. The young people appear to be actively seeking to resolve the problems they are encountering to ease their emotional distress, however the biggest challenge that these young people face is the fact that the problems they are trying to resolve are usually beyond their control.

#### **4.4.3 Vicious Circle**

Many young people were described as being trapped in a vicious circle because they were engaging in unauthorised absence from school which would likely mean some form of punishment from school authorities if they did return to school, and due to missed class time, a deficit would exist in their school work. Both of these factors encourage the cycle of non-attendance to continue so that without intervention, returning to school may appear to be too difficult and is therefore avoided. By understanding the lives of these young people from a psychological perspective, it is possible to at least shed some insight into the real issues that are preventing them from attending school and engaging in education. The vicious circle that young people are trapped in is a symptom of the problem that serves to compound not wanting to attend further.

School disciplinary actions are more likely to be given to pupils with the greatest academic, emotional, social and economic needs (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001). Children in the care of local authorities are more likely to be suspended or excluded from school (Francis, 2000) yet these punishments do little to address the underlying issues that these young people present with. Nogeura (2003) points out that schools are more likely to react to negative behaviours while failing to address the factors that are contributing to these behaviours and by doing so further marginalise pupils further. Being trapped in a vicious circle of behaviour highlights the need for sensitive management of unauthorised absence from school by school and care authorities, so that they don't in effect create an environment of additional barriers for these young people to continue not attending.

#### **4.4.4 Care Environment**

The care environment was identified as being a significant determinant in young people attending school or not. Some young people, due to their difficulties could not be placed in foster care and it

was specifically these young people who were viewed as being vulnerable to the influence of their residential peers. Educational outcomes for children in residential care are generally poorer than other placement types, whilst also suggesting that there can be an increased likelihood of criminal behaviour, self-harm, absconding and bullying among residents (Berridge, Biehal & Henry, 2011), while the current study also identifies truancy as an additional concern. The experience of living in a residential children's home is largely under researched as is more specifically the role of peer relationships among residents (Edmond, 2003). In adolescence the influence of peers becomes particularly evident and there is a strong association between having peers who engage in negative activities and the increased likelihood of an individual also participating in similar behaviours (Chamberlain & Moore, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The negative influence of peers in residential care was evidenced in this study when young people saw their peers not attending school which played a role in their decision not to attend also.

When talking about young people, service providers made a distinction between those who live in residential care as being more likely to engage in unauthorised absence compared to young people living in foster care. Based on their professional experience, participants were able to draw comparisons between young people that they worked with who lived in either residential or foster care, finding that foster care was the preferred option in terms of promoting positive educational outcomes. In general residential care placements have declined in recent decades partly because they are associated with poorer outcomes for residents. It was a shared view that foster placements had a positive influence on young people and there is a growing wealth of literature that supports the opinion that family or family-like placements such as foster care are much better able to meet the needs of these young people (Berridge et al., 2011).



#### 4.4.5 Lack of motivation

A key issue identified by service providers was that young people did not feel motivated to attend school. Motivation is a strong predictor of academic success and is viewed as a crucial factor when determining a student's achievements within education (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For LACYP, the role that parental or caregiver involvement has in the development of motivation is of particular interest. Motivation is broadly described as the process that initiates, guides and maintains goal orientated behaviours. Through their involvement parents or caregivers demonstrate to children the importance of education (Gonzalez-De Hass et al., 2005). Children become motivated when they see significant adults in their lives take an active interest in their education, so that when these adults show enthusiasm for what their children are learning they are in effect providing a support system at home that reinforces the value of school. Marchant, Paulson and Rothlisberg, (2001) found that when students perceived their parents as valuing education and academic success, students were more motivated and perceived themselves as having higher levels of academic competence.

Even when a young person lacks an internal motivation in relation to attending school, the responsibility of trying to re-motivate them rests with the parents, either biological or corporate, who have a duty of care to promote education ([www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk)). The influence of residential staff involved in the day to day care of young people was criticised, with participants expressing concerns that staff were preoccupied with the practical aspects of managing a care home and providing care rather than seeking to motivate their young people in relation to school and education. It has previously been identified that those involved in the care of LACYP often don't prioritise education or create an environment conducive to educational success because of competing priorities to meet practical needs. Questions have been raised about the inadequate education and training of staff members themselves (Martin & Jackson, 2002) and previous authors have recommended that in order to improve the educational chances of these young people, a qualified and supported workforce is essential (Gallagher, Brennan, Jones & Westwood, 2004).

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the first research study undertaken to explore why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among looked after young people, from the perspective of service providers who work with these young people in a professional capacity. Interviewees outlined the emotional challenges faced in the school environment both relating to personal characteristics of young people and the stigma placed on them by peers. Young people were described as engaging in unproductive pass times when they should have been at school that included risk taking behaviours. Additionally they were found to have different priorities than education relating to reasons for entering the care system, placement changes, family contact and emotional needs. Traditional methods of addressing the issue such as disciplinary actions taken by schools and staff within the care system were deemed unhelpful, with service providers suggesting the need to address the underlying issues rather than the use of force.

The following chapter will detail Study Two, which was carried out with looked after young people who have a history of unauthorised absence from school. The study will outline their perspective of this issue, what contributed to their behaviour and what they recommend to be helpful for others.



## **Chapter 5.0**

### **Study Two: Perspectives from Young People**

## **5.0 Overview**

The following chapter presents the second of three studies that sought to explore the higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among post primary looked after young people. This second study represents the Microsystem within the Ecological Systems Model, that explores the school experiences of looked after young people to gain a better understanding of why they have engaged in non-attendance. The chapter details how the study was conducted, how data was collected and analysed, and what participants revealed about the issue.

### **5.1 Background and Rationale**

In this chapter, Study Two aims to explore the higher rates of unauthorised absence from school amongst looked after post primary pupils in NI, from the perspective of the young people themselves. It was anticipated that these young people would be able to provide a depth of unique insight and understanding as to why those with looked after status have engaged in this type of behaviour. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) identifies that every child has the right to express their views and feelings and that these will be treated seriously in relation to all matters directly affecting to them (UNCRC, Article 12, 1989). The UNCRC Committee, in its Concluding Observations for the UK in 2016, highlighted concerns that children's voices are not heard in policy making on issues that affect them and recommended their participation should be apparent in the design of all policies and their implementation. Children in the care of the state are routinely identified as a marginalised and vulnerable group so this Concluding Observation is of particular significance. The voice of disadvantaged groups is especially important; the value of being heard means it can be used to inform, researchers, local authorities and service providers, as well as the policy makers who make decisions that directly impacts their lives. It was hoped that by participating in interviews the young people, rather than researcher, would direct what issues were important to him/her and therefore give a more vivid picture of the world as they experience it (Munro, 2001). From early childhood and throughout the lifespan, the opportunity to present

personal views and to be heard is one of the most important issues in identity construction (McLeod, 2008). By engaging in research, young people are encouraged to become active participants in a supportive dialogue where they can begin to develop a positive personal identity, mastery and control of their emotions (Rutter 1990), all of which are associated with positive feelings of high self-esteem and emotional well-being (Munro 2001). A significant proportion of children and young people have come into care as a result of abuse or neglect and have inherently been in positions of powerlessness. Due to the nature of the care system, LACYP are surrounded by numerous adults who work with them in a professional capacity and all of whom are in a position of relative power. By encouraging young people to participate in and influence the decisions made about them and their lives, this power imbalance can be addressed, in both their experiences prior to and possibly during care, and in enabling the young person to develop a more balanced view of the world around them and their value within it (Edwards & Weller, 2012).

The young people who participated in this study were recruited through the Voice of Young People In Care (VOYPIC) which is a registered charity in NI. Set up in 1993 by a group of young people in care and practitioners, VOYPIC seeks to promote the rights and improve the outcomes of care experienced children and young people. VOYPIC's vision is that every child or young person in care has positive relationships, safety and stability, and that they are empowered to transform their lives. VOYPIC actively promotes the involvement of children and young people, advocating that they have consistent opportunities to share their experiences and views in order to help practitioners, academics and decision makers understand what needs to happen to make their lives better ([www.voypic.org](http://www.voypic.org)).

## 5.2 Methodology

### 5.2.1 Research Design

An exploratory, qualitative design was used with semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary source for data collection. This was deemed an appropriate strategy in order to gather data without imposing preordained concepts (Smith 2003). Interviewing is also a useful technique when seeking to engage harder to reach groups such as looked after young people because it provides the opportunity to have a voice, in a safe environment that promotes the importance of their views and experiences (Gibson, 2012; Kirby, 2004). As outlined in Chapter Three, section 3.4.3, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used as part of the design because the study sought to understand the topic of investigation in the context of young people's experiences of school, education and unauthorised absence.

### 5.2.2 Participants and Sampling Procedures

The sampling method applied to the recruitment of participants for each study was purposive in nature to ensure that those looked after young people who engaged in unauthorised absence from school could make an active contribution to the research. Participant recruitment was facilitated by VOYPIC Project Workers who promoted participation in the study among young people aged 12 to 18 years and who were currently in contact with their service. Looked after young people can be a hard to reach group due to their individual circumstances, the physical and emotional upheaval of being in care and the instability of some placements; these challenges of access were reflected in recruitment difficulties when only a small number of young people agreed to be interviewed. Difficulties reaching data saturation occurred as a result of limited availability and willingness of young people to take part. For example, although a number of young people (n=14) expressed an interest in the study their circumstances at the time, particularly in relation to placement instability

and emotional well-being, took precedence over participation and meant that they were unable to participate within the time frame for field work. In the end, interviews were conducted with four of the young people who volunteered to take part in this study (See Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Participant demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Care Placement	Educational status
2a	Female	14	Kinship Care	Attending alternative education provision
2b	Male	16	Supported Accommodation / Independent Living	Student at further and higher education provider
2c	Male	15	Residential Care Home	Attending alternative education provision
2d	Female	17	Foster Care	Student at further and higher education provider

### 5.2.3 Ethics

Ethical consideration was applied to this study through the completion of a full research ethics application that included a risk assessment to determine any impact of participation on the young people and the researcher. The risk assessment identified the need for confidentiality, informed assent and consent, the right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and participant and researcher wellbeing. As outlined in Chapter 3.0, measures were implemented to limit risks. Ethical approval for this study was granted on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011 by the University of Ulster Research and Ethics Committee (Appendix 2).



#### 5.2.4 Procedural details

VOYPIC Project Workers informed all service users aged between 12 and 18 years who they knew to have a history of unauthorised absence from school about the aim and purpose of the research study. They provided a detailed information sheet prepared by the researcher, explained the information sheet and asked young people if they would be interested in taking part (Appendix 6). For those who were under the age of eighteen and wished to participate, consent was obtained prior to the interview from their legal guardian and assent was provided by the young person (Appendix 7-8). Project Workers assisted the participants in this process by discussing the research with relevant legal guardians, including social workers and biological family. Completed copies of the consent form and assent form were provided for participants that they could retain for their own records and copies were held by the researcher. After consent and assent were given, arrangements were then made for the researcher to meet with the Project Worker and the young person at their local VOYPIC office, where the interview would take place. In a private room allocated for the interview, the researcher met with the Project Worker and young person where the interview process was again explained and the young person could ask any questions of the researcher. The Project Worker could remain during the interview if requested, however, if the young person was comfortable to be interviewed alone, the Project Worker based him/herself in an adjoining room in case they were needed by the participant or researcher at any time. Before commencing the interview, the researcher clarified any questions the young person had and, once ready, the researcher activated the audio-digital recorder. Using the interview schedule, the interview commenced (Appendix 9). A maximum of one hour was allocated for all interviews; however the interview length varied for each young person. It was important to initially spend some time engaging with each young person, and gently introduce the topic. After approximately one hour, the interview ended. All four young people participated fully in the interview process by demonstrating their willingness to contribute to the research, and agreed the importance of having their experiences used to help others in similar situations.

### 5.2.5 Data Analysis

Each interview recording was transcribed verbatim. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen to analyse the content of the transcribed interviews. The main focus of IPA is to explore in depth how individuals make sense of their external environment and the meanings that particular experiences have for them. The key aim of the analysis is to try to understand the content and diversity that these meanings have (Smith, 2003).

Initial analysis began with a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcript to allow a deeper understanding of each participant's experience and maintains the focus of the analysis. Exploratory comments are developed by highlighting characteristics within the text that consist of descriptive comments such as key words, phrases, descriptions and emotional responses, and specific details such as events or experiences; and linguistic comments within the transcript that reflected how the content and meaning were presented linguistically, instances of direct speech were noted when a participant quoted something someone said to them. Particular attention was given to pronoun use, pauses, laughter, and functional aspects of language, recurrence, and metaphor use. Linguistic characteristics were highlighted such as sighing, tone and repetition. The researcher began to move into a more interpretive stage of analysis by making conceptual comments, which included the development of questions about meaning and key concepts emerging from the data. Table 5.2 outlines examples of how the exploratory comments evolved during the first stage of analysis.

Table 5.2 Exploratory Comments

Analysis	Findings	Example
Descriptive comments	Reflections on a difficult experience  Unhappiness at school	<i>...awe it was terrible...secondary school aye it was terrible...  ...high school it was I didn't really like it I didn't attend very much...</i>
Linguistic comments	Direct speech	<i>...most people would go "at least my ma and da want me" just stuff like that there some of them would say my mum never wanted me from the start and just said I was a denied child...</i>
Conceptual comments	Social rejection	<i>...I felt that everyone was against me because I was in through the care system I thought that they thought that I'd done something wrong to get put into care which I hadn't...</i>

The next stage of analysis involved developing exploratory comments into emerging themes by interpreting and linking the exploratory comments. This stage is more analytical as the researcher

begins to identify and make sense of the connections between comments, which result in the emergence of a theme (Smith, 2015). Table 5.3 is an example that demonstrates how themes became evident.

Table 5.3 Emerging themes

Transcript excerpt	Emergent theme
<i>...they think they've too much power cause they're a teacher they try and overdo it...</i>	Dislike teachers
<i>...when I was in first year to second year I got really badly bullied...</i>	Bullied by peers
<i>...I felt like it had no meaning to be there...</i>	School has no value

The final stage of analysis required the identification of patterns across emerging themes that involved bringing similar themes together and examining the differences between them to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. It was important to remain conscious of the individuality of each interview transcript to allow for new concepts to develop and the merging of themes across cases. Connections were made using commonalities in the participant's dialect including emotions, places and events. These were grouped into clusters of subordinate themes that then allowed the development of dominant or superordinate themes as the key findings from the analysis. Table 5.4 demonstrates the linking of subordinate themes into superordinate themes.

Table 5.4 Linking Sub-ordinate and Super-ordinate themes

Sub-ordinate themes	Super-ordinate themes
Dislike teachers	School is a difficult place to be
Bullied by peers	
School has no value	

Four super-ordinate themes in total were generated from the interview transcripts; collectively, these provided very individual perspectives of the school experiences of these young people engaged and provided insights into why they engaged in unauthorised absence from school and what their experiences of school were like.

Table 5.5 Super and Sub-ordinate themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes	Description
School is a difficult place to be	Dislike teachers Bullying School has no meaning	Participants initially described difficult experiences they had while attending school that had led them to not wanting to be there including poor relationships with teachers, being bullied by their peers and not seeing the value or benefit of attending.
Unhelpful pastimes when not in school	Drinking alcohol Spending time with older peers	Young people detailed how they spent their time when they should have been in

		school such as drinking alcohol and socialising with older peers.
Consequences	Suspension / Expulsion  Discipline	As a consequence of not attending school young people outlined how their school managed their behaviour, involvement from police and the discipline measures of those in a parental capacity
Needing support	Getting to know young person  Talking about problems  Alternatives to school	Participants felt that teachers and social workers should get to know them better and help them talk about their problems with school. They also found that attending alternatives to traditional schools was helpful.

### 5.3 Findings

#### 5.3.1 Theme one: School is a difficult place to be

Initially, each young person was asked if they could tell the researcher about their experiences of attending school. The reasons given mostly related to the school environment, which they described as a difficult place to be; comments were based on their interactions with peers and teaching staff with both negatively impacting on their attendance:

Participant 2a: *...I found it really difficult because there was a lot of peer pressure and the teachers weren't seeing it...*

Participant 2b: *...awe it was terrible...secondary school aye it was terrible...*

Participant 2c: *...didn't like school didn't like the teachers and didn't like any of the subjects...*

Participant 2d: *...high school it was I didn't really like it I didn't attend very much...*

### Bullying

Bullying at school is a common phenomenon among looked after pupils and this was clearly evident in the experiences of the young people in this study who provided insights into to their reluctance to attend school, in particular the effect of persistent bullying:

Participant 2a: *...when I was in first year to second year I got really badly bullied...*

Participant 2b: *...I wasn't a liked person...it's all the ones in school these days the bullying*

Participant 2d: *...just because of the bullying stuff like that there...it was just like really hard because some of the people that bullied me I thought were some of my best mates...calling me names and then when I tried to get away from them I'd hid in the toilets and they'd know I was there and they'd stand outside until I did come back out...*

These three participants also felt that the bullying they experienced was directly related to being in care:

Participant 2a: *...I felt that everyone was against me because I was in through the care system I thought that they thought that I'd done something wrong to get put into care which I hadn't...*

Participant 2b: *...the best thing that stops you from going to school is all the stuff from the outside that gets carried in by people and then people that doesn't even know you in school find out stuff about you...*

Participant 2d: *...most people would go at least my ma and da want me just stuff like that there some of them would say my mum never wanted me from the start and just said I was a denied child stuff like that there...*

Additionally, one young person explained how she became a bully as a way of coping with others bullying her:

Participant 2a: *...I turned it around and started bullying others so I did because I wanted to be the one with all the friends and it turned out really bad...I look back on it and feel really embarrassed about what I'd done and everything and I hurt other people like I had fights all the time...I cried a lot because of the bullying and I think that's why I turned into a bully...*

#### Dislike of teachers

All of the young people interviewed had negative views of or experiences with, teachers in school in a variety of ways. One young person stated that the teachers had been very curious about their care circumstances, finding the questions both uncomfortable and intrusive:

Participant 2a: *...I didn't get on with many teachers...all the teachers were asking me questions about it[care] where are you questions about what it was like where are you and everything and I didn't like to talk about it that much...*

The other participants expressed dislike of their teachers because of the nature of interactions with them. These relationships were often described as conflicting, with the young people struggling to manage their behaviour:

Participant 2b: *...they think they've too much power cause they're a teacher they try and overdo it...*

Participant 2c: *...just didn't get on with them...*



Participant 2d: *...I wasn't really good towards the teachers... I just didn't like the fact they were telling me what to do and they were controlling me I just didn't like it so I didn't...so I wasn't really fond of any of them...*

#### School had no meaning

One young person felt that there was no purpose or need to attend school as he did not find the content of their school work engaging. He also did not see the importance of the topics covered in lessons or how this would benefit him in the longer term:

Participant 2b: *...I felt like it had no meaning to be there you see most of the stuff they tried to teach you was just stupid really stupid cause you see the outer world of work nothing to do with it half the stuff they learn you it's just stupid...I felt I knew more than what I had to go there for it was stupid...I just felt like I knew more than what school was teaching me they weren't teaching me the right kind of things you could say for what I wanted...*

Similarly two other young people's attitudes towards school suggested it held little value to them because they were not interested or motivated by the curriculum topics, with the suggestion that this, in part, was due to previously broken school attendance:

Participant 2d: *...I missed a lot when I was at school my education and I just wasn't really into anything at high school I'd just ignore everything I didn't really pick anything up...*

Participant 2c: *...I just wouldn't be bothered...*

### 5.3.2 Theme 2: Unhelpful pastimes when not in school

Young people were asked how they spent their time while not in school and they described a range of activities that were not only unhelpful in resolving the difficulties of their circumstances, but that were also potentially placing them at risk of harm:

### Spending time with older peers

Two young people described how they spent time with older friends when they should have been at school and they recognised the negative implications of this behaviour. This generally involved congregating in groups and aimless hanging around over the course of the day:

Participant 2a: *...with older ones.....I just would've messed about in town...*

Participant 2c: *...I was with a bad crowd...I hung about with older people back then too like who weren't in school...*

### Drinking alcohol

When young people were asked what behaviours they were involved in when they should have been at school, three explained they often drank alcohol with their older peers:

Participant 2a: *...sometimes I would've hit the drink so I did whenever I wasn't in school...*

Participant 2c: *...on the drink or something...*

Participant 2d: *...drink stuff like that there...*

## 5.3.4 Theme 3: Consequences

The young people were then asked if they had experienced any consequences as a result of not attending school. This included consequences applied by either the school or their parents/guardians in response to their non-attendance. Consequences were described in terms of school suspension or expulsion and discipline measures.

### School suspension or expulsion

Three young people described how their school used suspension, expulsion or both as a disciplinary measure in response to their unauthorised absences and each reported experiences of these. The young people did not view this consequence as having any productive merit and stated that such sanctions were more likely to encourage further non-attendance:

Participant 2a: *...I got expelled so I did because of my behaviour...I got expelled from mainstream so I did...I knew if I went in I'd get suspended so what's the point...*

Participant 2b: *...they would suspend you but I don't see the point in suspending you like you're still going to the house know what I mean and that's you sitting in the house then it's silly like they suspend you for 2 weeks and you can't wait...*

Participant 2d: *...well they expelled me in the end up cause the last year my attendance was like 19% or something the only time I did go in I got suspended...*

One participant went on to explain how his school had a special educational unit for pupils who had been suspended that effectively contained and monitored pupils over the school day:

Participant 2b: *...then they came in with this thing where you still have to go to school in the one room all day round the clock not allowed out they take you out to go to the toilet they bring your lunch down to you and all...*

Researcher: *...and you wouldn't even be allowed outside?*

Participant 2b: *...naw nothing it was kind of lock down from 9 til about 2.55...you called it the suspension unit...*

## Discipline

The young people also described discipline measures used by their parents or carers in response to non-attendance but they reiterated again that these sanctions carried little threat and did not improve the likelihood of them going to school:

Participant 2b: *...I would've got grounded and then it got to the stage where they couldn't even do that anymore I just got up and walked out...*

Another young person described how his mother tried to get him to go to school:

Researcher: *...would there have been any one at home going well you need to be going to school?*

Participant 2c: *...me ma I'd tell her to wise up just...*

Researcher: *...and would you have got grounded or anything?*

Participant 2c: *...she tried to...*

One young person explained how, due to the large number of days she had missed, an attendance officer from the education board visited her mother in an attempt to improve the situation, which led to the involvement of social services. Notably, a key contributory factor was that her mother was complicit in her non-attendance:

Participant 2d: *...they would've noticed how much school I was missing so they sent an attendance officer out to the house that's when I started going to school so that they said that my mum would've had to go to jail or something if I stayed off any more days because it was a very serious thing I was doing and then the social workers got involved and it just went all down for me...*

Researcher: *...and would your mum have said anything to you about going to school?*

Participant 2d: *...my mum wouldn't have cared cause mummy would've wanted me to stay off school with her anyway so...*

One young person described how even the involvement of the police did little to encourage attendance at school. In these instances, someone from the school would telephone the residential unit to say she had been absent; this then lead residential staff to contact the police as a safeguarding measure due to her age and looked after status.

Participant 2a: *...what I really disliked about it was the police ending up finding me...*

Researcher: *...so someone the school would've phoned home and said you haven't been in school today...*

Participant 2a: *...yes...*

Researcher: *...and the police would've been out looking...*

Participant 2a: *...yes...*

Researcher: *...and the police would they have been nice to you?*

Participant 2a: *...no...*

Researcher: *...would they have given you a bit of a mouthful?*

Participant 2a: *...real nasty...*

Researcher: *...and would they have lectured you you have to go to school?*

Participant 2a: *...yeah but now I can see they were doing the right thing but obviously not then...*

#### 5.3.5 Theme 4: Needing Support

Young people were then asked if there had been anything that had helped them address the issues they had in relation to attending school. Responses focused mainly on alternatives to school, support from others and the value of talking to peers.

### Alternatives to school

Two young people described how a change of environment from mainstream school to alternative education provision improved their attendance rates:

Participant 2a: *...it's a behaviour school...*

Participant 2c: *...I was in AEP alternative education programme...*

One young person went on to explain that alternative education was better for her than mainstream school because the structure of the day was shorter and rules were less formal:

Participant 2a: *...you don't need to wear a uniform which is a lot better and eh the class times are shorter so you go into school at 10 o'clock and you finish about 2 and I just think it's easier that way cause it's shorter cause I feel if it was longer I would get agitated and I would lose my concentration stuff like that there...I think it's been good to get away from mainstream to like a smaller group setting...*

The other young person similarly described alternative education as a better alternative to mainstream school because of its more relaxed approach although he also acknowledged that regular attendance continued to be a challenge:

Participant 2c: *...it was alright it was better but I didn't really like it either...it was more laid back...*

Interestingly, however, both young people described how the environment of an alternative education setting had enabled them to make progress with their education. Both young people described alternative education as better than mainstream school because it enabled them to find a more consistent and flexible pattern of working that met their learning needs:

Participant 2a: *...I got the time to sort myself out and now I can move on and go get my GCSE's and get ready for them and everything...*

Participant 2c: *...I only done one GCSE...*

Researcher: *...and how did you find it?*

Participant 2c: *...well I got a B...*

Two participants also attended Further Education Colleges which they found to be better than mainstream school because there was a change in their peer group and for one young person, the opportunity to catch up on missed school work:

Participant 2a: *...what you do is you go to tech as well...which is a lot better...*

Participant 2d: *...I just started tech so I did it's not too bad it's better than high school...it's way better because I've met new people...I'm in a course it's to get my English maths and science up then I'm doing catering every Wednesday so I want to cook...*

#### Support from others

While all of the young people expressed negative perceptions of teachers, two of them acknowledged they had received support from teachers which they found helpful:

Participant 2a: *...it was only like my head of year I really got on with she was there through everything like she tried her hardest like she came up to see me when I was in care when I didn't want to go to school and like she was a great help for me she really was...*

Participant 2b: *...if you're on your own it's one by one learning you you'll learn more it's the way I look at it...there was only one or two teachers in there that knew me...I got some work done cause there wasn't many in that class that kind of proves it know what I mean...*

One young person felt that the support and encouragement she received from her carers encouraged her to continue with her education:

Participant 2d: *...well my aunt and uncle who I'm in {kinship}care with now they really want me to start getting an education and they would keep me going to the tech and stuff so they're really supportive so they are they're really good so they are...*

Finally, the young people were asked if there was anything they thought teachers, carers, service providers or social workers should know that would help them better understand the difficulties young people in care experience in relation to education. Everyone emphasised the need for these adults to take time to talk to young people themselves if they were to gain a genuine understanding of their needs.

#### Talk to young people

One young person suggested that if teachers got to know pupils in care on a more personal level, that this would be helpful in identifying and meeting their educational needs:

Participant 2b: *...try to get the teachers to know you more see when teachers know you more they would know the rest of the class you know you're going to get more help...*

Another young person stated that teachers needed to be sensitive to the emotional impact on a young person of being in care:

Participant 2a: *...I think they just need to keep an eye on how a person is feeling about being in care so if they're a bit upset about it don't mention it cause that's what I found...*

Two participants indicated that social workers, rather than simply pressurising them to attend school, should take time to talk to the young people they work with to establish the reasons for a pattern of unauthorised absence:

Participant 2b: *...don't be on their back ask talk to them first find out the best way for them to go back to school cause you see when social workers are pushing you to go back that's more reason for*



*you not to go you know you're annoying them see like when social workers were on my back pushing me to go I purposely didn't go...*

Participant 2d: *...just basically it's not all they think is going on they have to ask they have to ask them what they think they have to ask the children what's going on for them no one ever asked what was going on at school for me they just decided it was this it was that no one ever asked the child what was wrong for them...*

## **5.4 Discussion**

While difficulties reaching data saturation occurred as a result of the availability of young people within the data collection period and the unwillingness of some to take part, the experiences and views of the young people who did participate offer valuable insights regarding their educational experiences, and important conclusions can be drawn from these. Each looked after young person described a poor experience of the education system and school environment, describing bullying by peers and a negative perception or experience of teachers who may have had limited awareness and understanding of their circumstances. This was a recurrent theme even within a sample of this size. These experiences seem to have had an isolating impact on these young people, causing them to disengage from the learning process, to lose interest in education and its relevance to them and to subsequently withdraw from school.

It has been well established by both the DENI and EA that bullying continues to be a serious issue in all schools across Northern Ireland. Despite the implementation of anti-bullying policy in 2003, the most recent report carried out by the DENI found little evidence of change in the frequency of pupils being bullied, with over a third (39%) of year 6 pupils and just under a third (29%) of year 9 pupils reporting bullying at school in the previous two months (DENI, 2011). Looked after young people are at a disproportionate risk of being bullied for a number of reasons, such as the stigma of being in care, regular changes in schools, placement changes, difficulty forming friendships or poor

relationships skills as a result of attachment difficulties, unhelpful reactions to situations as a result of learned behaviours, a reluctance to make friends, low self-esteem, lack of role models and a heightened need for privacy (Rao & Simkiss, 2007). Little research exists that specifically addresses the prevalence of bullying among LACYP, yet it is often highlighted as a significant issue. Most recently, a survey carried out by VOYPIC identified a disproportionate level of bullying among 106 care-experienced children and young people aged between 8 and 18 years old, of which over a fifth (21%) reporting bullying (Allen & Gilligan, 2012). Although there are relatively low numbers of pupils who are looked after in the overall school population, schools need to be aware of the vulnerability of these young people and the increased risk of bullying. Vigorous implementation and monitoring of an anti-bullying policy that includes awareness raising among school staff and pupils is a starting point in term of preventative measures. The Education and Libraries (NI) Order (2003) requires all schools to include within their discipline policy, an anti-bullying policy which details measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The effectiveness of these measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections of anti-bullying arrangements. It would be important that looked after pupils are identified in this type of policy as having a higher risk of bullying due to their care status and vulnerability; additionally looked after pupils could benefit from schools promoting positive relationships between peers who have a protected characteristic and those who don't ([www.antibullyingworks.co.uk](http://www.antibullyingworks.co.uk)).

Teachers were viewed negatively by young people, who perceived them as having 'too much power' and 'over doing it' in relation to how they interacted with pupils: in terms of how they sanctioned non-attendance but also in terms of the lack of sensitivity and respect for privacy that they showed young people. These interpersonal relationships seemed to lack an appropriate balance; young people felt exposed, misunderstood and stigmatised because they are looked after and they believed in social contexts including school, this is used to treat them less favourably. The stigma associated with being care experienced is exceptionally damaging. For example, the *Care and Prejudice* report (OFSTED, 2009) surveyed 362 children from children's homes and foster care across

England and found overall, that children in care believe that the general public viewed them as uncontrollable and trouble-makers; this was most prevalent among females, those placed in children's homes, those who had been longest in care and disabled children. Over half of those surveyed feared being stigmatized because of their background while length of time in care was correlated with increased reports of being treated less favourably by those in a position of power such as teachers and employers. It is important to consider the impact stigma has on the development of young people, how they view themselves and the world around them. Goffman (1963) proposed that people who are stigmatized are viewed by others as possessing an attribute that discredits them and reduces them to less than whole persons in the eyes of others. That attribute could be skin colour, religion, sexual orientation, or any number of other characteristics that are devalued by dominant cultures. The damaging impact of stigma is evidenced in the differences that exist between stigmatized and non-stigmatized individuals on a wide range of outcomes including education, socioeconomic status, psychological and physical health (Eccleston, 2008).

Young people's descriptions of their experiences at school suggest it was a hostile environment to be in with difficult interactions with peers and teachers. Understandably if this is what school and education represent to them, then it would be difficult to see the purpose or benefit of attending. Motivation is crucial to educational success, and is broadly described as the process that initiates, guides and maintains goal orientated behaviours. Deci and Ryan, (1985) distinguish between different types of motivation based on the various reasons or goals that lead to a particular action. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something that is inherently pleasurable while extrinsic motivation describes doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. Academic intrinsic or autonomous motivation can be described as the enjoyment derived from school learning with an orientation towards mastery, curiosity, persistence, task endogeny and the learning of challenging, difficult or novel tasks (Gottfried, Gottfried, Oliver & Marcoulides, 2009). This type of motivation is of particular interest to educators and psychologists alike as it has been found to result in high levels

of learning and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies that have explored the relationship that exists between motivation and student achievement have demonstrated the importance of the development of self-determined forms of motivation. Guay, Ratelle and Chanal, (2008) tested whether students have different motivational profiles and whether certain profiles were more helpful for academic adjustment. They found that when a student had a profile of high autonomous motivation they had the most positive indicators of educational adjustment including higher achievement, concentration and satisfaction, with lower absenteeism and anxiety in relation to their studies. It is thought that parents who provide praise and reassurance to their children for their efforts promotes the development of self-determined motivation (Gonzalez-De Hass, Willems & Doan-Holbein, 2005).

Consistent with existing literature, young people described engaging in underage drinking as one of the ways they spent their school day. Starting to drink alcohol in early adolescence is associated with an increased likelihood of developing both problem drinking in adolescence (Ellickson et al., 2001; Hawkins et al., 1997), and alcohol abuse or dependence in adulthood (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras 2009; DeWit et al., 2000; Grant & Dawson, 1997). Early initiation of drinking is also associated with a variety of other problematic outcomes later in adolescence and adulthood, academic underachievement, delinquent behaviour, fighting, illicit drug use, prescription drug misuse, substance use disorders, employment problems, risky sexual behaviour, early or underage pregnancy, unintentional injuries and criminal convictions. Given the links with multiple later problems, it is essential to develop a better understanding of the risk factors that predict the early initiation of alcohol use, why young people engage in this behaviour and what they perceive as the benefit in doing so. Research in this area proposes that adolescents drink alcohol due to thrill seeking and arousal expectancies, as a way to manage their emotions and in response to stressful experiences (Grant & Dawson, 1997; Hingson & Henkel, 2004) Other studies have shown that drinking motives typically involve the prospect of a valued outcome (Cooper, 1994; Cox & Klinger, 1988) and that the desired effects of cognitive, behavioural and emotional changes as a result of alcohol consumption

will reinforce the function of this behaviour (Kuntsche, Knibb, Gmel, Engels, 2005). In this study, young people indicated they drank alcohol when with older peers; spending time with older peers is a risk factor in itself for underage drinking (Ramirez et al., 2012). Older peer groups serve as a model which influences behaviours and attitudes of those younger; it may also provide easy access, encouragement and an appropriate social setting for consumption (Glaser, Shelton & Bree, 2010). Social Learning Theory highlights that it is not even necessary for adolescents to observe a given behaviour and adopt it; but it is sufficient to perceive that the peer group accepts it including dangerous or risk taking activities, for similar behaviours to be adopted (Petratis, Flay & Miller, 1995; Tome & Gaspar de Matos, 2012).

In response to not attending school, school authorities disciplined young people by using suspension or expulsion methods which did not serve to deter young people. Instead, they viewed it as a pointless gesture because it meant that they did not have to attend which was the outcome they wanted. Under Article 49, of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order (1986) (as amended), the Education Authority is required to specifying school procedures to be followed in relation to the suspension or expulsion of pupils. The Schools (Suspension and Expulsion of Pupils) Regulations (NI) (1995) (as amended) specifies the matters which must be included in these procedures. Schools must have a disciplinary policy that outlines the expectations of pupil behaviour and sanctions imposed for non-compliance. While schools will have their own individual policy, legislation dictates that suspension or expulsion should only occur in response to a period of indiscipline or an incident of serious indiscipline (EA, 2015). It is not clear from these findings what happened in the lead up to schools suspending or expelling these young people, or if any other factors contributed to that decision. However, this form of discipline has received some criticism particularly as a way of managing absence since there is no evidence that it leads to improvements in pupil behaviour (Duckett, Sixsmith & Kagan, 2008; Gale & Topping, 1986; Imich, 1994; McFadden, Marsh, Price & Hwang, 1992). Although it is intended as a last resort, in the 2016/17 school year 4038 pupils were suspended from post primary schools in NI, representing almost 3% of the population (2.82%) with

6805 suspensions recorded in total due to repeated suspension of the same pupils (DENI, 2018). The impact of exclusion is often found to create problems rather than resolve them; pupils can be labelled problem students by being alienated from school; they have increased dropout rates at an earlier stage of education that in turn contributes to academic failure and reduced employment outcomes. Additionally suspended students are known to be more likely to be involved in risky behaviour and even in serious crimes (Kohistani, Dougherty & Klofas, 2015; Sautner, 2001). By extension, parents and care givers also feel the impact of school exclusion due to increased demand to provide daily supervision that requires them to take time off work and subsequently adds to the emotional strain on relationships (Parker, Paget, Ford & Gwernan-Jones, 2016).

Interestingly, whilst some of the participants in this study viewed their teachers negatively, they also readily identified positive relationships that were meaningful to them and which helped them to better engage in their school work. This is an important point which has links to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1977). Children's attachment style with their parents can serve as a template for the relationships they have with others and with those who they engage with. In the school environment this affiliation between teacher and child is likely to mirror the attachment the child has with its parents or caregivers (O'Connor & McCartney, 2006). As they engage in educational activities directed by their teacher, children use this relationship as a secure base, and a growing body of research supports the belief that children with secure attachments are more successful in education (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). O'Connor and McCartney (2006) endorsed this assertion in three independent samples, by demonstrating that pupils with insecure parental attachments also had insecure teacher attachments. Their study suggested that teachers were more likely to have difficulty connecting with students who had an insecure attachment style because these children had pre-existing views that diminished the attachment process. As a result, insecure children were more likely to have problems in the educational context than securely attached children because secure children were more likely to establish a secure relationship with the teacher and view the teacher favourably that enabled them to have the confidence necessary to succeed and utilise the

teacher as a secure base from which they could explore and engage in the academic and school environment.

More specifically research has shown that while teachers can have an important role in a child's development, the counselling relationships between teachers and students can lead to more positive attitudes towards school, higher academic performance and greater self-concept and fewer absences (Learner & Kruger, 1997). Kennedy (2008) highlights that teachers need to be able to build trusting relationships with students in order to create a safe, positive, and productive learning environment; and that patient, kind and caring teachers build better relationships with pupils. Whisler (1991) suggests that a child's positive experience with their teacher can help buffer the effects of negative self-perception while Eccles et al (1993) found that it is the quality of the child/teacher attachment that is associated with the child's academic motivation and attitude towards education and school. The young people in this study actively recommended that teachers and social workers should get to know those who they work with better. They describe how these adults should take the time to know and understand what the circumstances of their young people are and that this is not only relating to education and school but also other areas of their lives. Their perception that this would be helpful for others can also be viewed as seeking out a secure attachment with a teacher or significant other. Awareness and promotion of this relationship by service providers could serve as one of the building blocks necessary for the development of resilience in the challenging circumstances in which they find themselves. Increasingly schools are being explored as places where resilience can be promoted within the holistic learning environment. School can be the one consistent feature in the life of a child coming from a disadvantaged background and considering the high numbers of children served by school and the amount of time children spend in the school environment, provides a reasonable logic (Brooks, 2006). In relation to LACYP, research indicates that school may be an alternative resource for helping recovery from trauma especially if the home environment remains a source of continued stress (Gilligan, 2007). Rutter (1991) suggests that the positive impact of school is most evident in those who are vulnerable

and have limited access to other support systems, with growing numbers of studies concluding that positive educational experiences may contribute to resilience and recovery among vulnerable children and young people (Dent & Cameron, 2003; O'Sullivan and Westerman, 2007). This also extends to experiences that include social relationships as well as academic achievement (Schofield et al., 2014). School can also be an appropriate place for resilience promoting interventions with school-based programmes aimed at either the whole school or for specific groups such as looked after pupils, that aim to develop emotional literacy and competence, emotional regulation, empathy, positive thinking and problem solving abilities (Action for Children, 2007).

Jackson and Martin (1998) identified educational success as a crucial factor when determining adult life style and social inclusion among looked after children and recommended that it should be given a high priority status by public care authorities. In their study of people who had been in care they determined a number of variables that appeared to contribute to psychological well-being and educational success such as having stability and continuity in care, learning to read at an early age, receiving support and encouragement from a parent, foster carer or other significant adult to continue into further education, having peers outside of care who also did well at school, having high levels of internal locus of control and intrinsic motivation, attending school regularly whilst also having a relationship with a significant adult who acted as a mentor, offering consistent encouragement and support on a regular basis. This demonstrates that not all LACYP go on to become vulnerable adults, and providing sustained support is in place growing numbers succeed despite the odds (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Gilligan (2000) suggests that there is a lot to be learned from these children who do well in the presence of difficult family or home circumstances. He promotes the necessity of employing a resilience led approach in policy and practice when working with children in need and highlights five key points that are needed when understanding resilience in children facing adversity including 1) reducing the number of problems by using interventions that eliminate problems and build on strengths, 2) pathways and turning points in development such as a positive experience that influences a child's trajectory, 3) having a secure base from which they can



explore the world around them, 4) self-esteem or self-worth were a child has at least one positive relationship or success that can buffer the effects of other failures, and 5) a sense of self direction were a child has a sense of where their life is leading.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the second study of this thesis that explored the issue of unauthorised absence from school with a group of looked after young people who had engaged in this behaviour. They described painful experiences in the school environment including bullying and stigmatisation among their peers directly relating to their looked after status that led to their absence from school. They recommend that teachers and social workers should spend more time getting to know young people rather than using discipline measures to address their behaviour, and alternatives to traditional education settings have been beneficial for them.

The following chapter details the third and final study of this thesis, which explores the issue of unauthorised absence with a group of mentors who are specifically matched to a looked after young person who is experiencing difficulties with their education and a history of non-attendance at school.

## **Chapter 6.0**

### **Study Three: Perspectives from Mentors**

## **6.0 Overview**

The following chapter details the third research study that explored the issue of unauthorised absence from school among looked after young people with a group of mentors who volunteer with VOYPIC. Situated within the Exosystem and the Mesosystem, the role of the mentors is specific to supporting the education and school attendance among this group, so it was anticipated they would be able to provide valuable insight into the issue. The chapter details the design of Study 3, how the data was collected and analysed, and what participants revealed about school non-attendance.

### **6.1 Background and Rationale**

During the design of the young people's study, the researcher became aware of the VOYPIC Mentoring Project that offers a support service to young people aged 12-18 years old who are experiencing challenges with their education. This was of particular interest to the research as the mentoring relationship gives particular attention to the young person's educational needs and focuses on the improvement of their school experience and future career prospects and aspirations. In addition to supporting education, emphasis is placed on the personal development of the young person, addressing key issues such as social exclusion, interpersonal skills, independence and coping skills. The Mentoring Project adopts a concentrated approach towards upgrading the educational achievements acquired of young person through a one to one relationship. The Mentor is trained to take account of the factors that impede school attendance, including addressing the risks and consequences of being expelled or suspended from school (VOYPIC, 2011).

The Mentoring Project began in 2007, in recognition that many LACYP experienced challenges with their education and school attendance. Due to these difficulties, the Mentoring Project sought to offer young people the opportunity to focus on these issues within the trusting relationship between mentor and mentee. Following an advertising campaign in local press and media, prospective mentors initially applied to VOYPIC; they undertook mentor training and, in line with safeguarding

measures, were required to complete an Access NI criminal records check to ensure their suitability to work with young people. Mentors were required to attend supervision and support sessions provided by VOYPIC Development Workers on a monthly basis both individually and as a group. This arrangement enabled VOYPIC to monitor support mentors and review the mentoring relationship. Mentors are obliged to report any concerns they have about the safety or wellbeing of young people. Mentors are matched to mentees based on similar interests, gender and any specific support needs of the young person that the mentor is able to provide. The mentoring relationship aims to provide weekly coaching, advice and support to care experienced young people in post primary education for up to one year. The relationship has particular, but not absolute, focus on the benefits of education and value in maintaining their current educational placement. Mentors assist young people develop self-esteem and confidence by meeting and building a relationship, actively participating in social and recreational activities and, talking to young people about school, homework and aspirations for their future (VOYPIC, 2011).

There is encouraging evidence about the importance of mentoring relationships between young people and adults through these one to one programmes. Teirney (1995) conducted a comparative study of 959 10- to 16-year-olds who applied to eight local mentoring programmes between 1992 and 1993. Half were randomly assigned to a treatment group with mentor matches made or attempted, and the other half were assigned to mentoring waiting lists. Comparison after 18 months found that participants matched to a mentor were less likely to use drugs and alcohol, less likely to physically assault others, had improved school attendance, performance and attitudes toward completing school work, and demonstrated improved peer and family relationships. In an educational context, the mentoring relationship is particularly beneficial in promoting positive outcomes that are facilitated by the psychosocial support offered to the mentee. Encouragement, friendship, advice and feedback on performance (Kram, 1985), all contribute to improving the perception mentees have about their ability to achieve their goals (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2004). Mentoring LACYP has also been found to be more beneficial in addressing other issues young

people encounter such as teenage pregnancy in comparison to authority provided interventions (Mezey et al., 2015).

The mentoring relationship was of particular interest to the research as the mentors were actively working with young people, many of whom had engaged in unauthorised absence from school. The relationship between mentor and mentee allowed the mentor to get to know the young person from a personal, social and educational perspective in terms of their likes, dislikes, attempts by authorities to address issues with school attendance, and their current educational status. The focus of the relationship has been to ideally improve educational outcomes using resilience promoting measures, through a relationship that would enhance the young person's view of themselves and their ability to succeed. Mentors entered the relationship with a desire to demonstrate to young people that they were important, valued and respected which has the potential to allow young people to experience a positive, healthy relationship. As many LACYP experience a lack of continuity in relationships with others due to placement moves, separation from family and peers, changes of caregivers (Holland, Faulkner & Perez-del-Aguila 2004), having some consistency in their relationship with their mentor, though limited to one year, did offer the opportunity to have a positive experience. It was conceivable that mentors would be able to provide considerable insight into the lives and circumstance of their mentee such as factors that contributed to non-attendance at school and what was helpful in addressing issues.

## **6.2 Methodology**

### **6.2.1 Research Design**

An exploratory, qualitative design was adopted in this study using semi-structured, one to one interviews. This method was chosen in order to provide descriptive data that detailed what participants (mentors) knew and understood to be contributing factors in unauthorised absence from school among young people (mentees). An interview schedule was developed and piloted with

the Chief Investigator. Interviewing with some structure in the question format was deemed to be the best way to obtain data as it permitted the participant to determine what they felt was important, rather than the researcher assuming which areas to explore.

### 6.2.2 Participants and Sampling Procedures

Participant recruitment was facilitated by VOYPIC Development Workers who circulated an information sheet detailing the research project among mentors currently engaged in the Mentoring Project (Appendix 10). Participant inclusion criteria were limited to those currently mentoring a looked after young person who had a history of unauthorised absence from school. Six mentors volunteered to take part in the study. Details were recorded of the gender, age and placement type of young people (Table 6.1):

Table 6.1 Participant demographic profile

Participant	Gender of Mentor	Gender of Mentee(s)	Age of mentee(s)	Mentee placement type
a	Male	Male	14	Foster care
b	Female	Female	14	Children's Home
c	Male	Male	14	Children's Home
d	Male	Male	12	Children's Home
e	Female	Female	14	Foster care
f	Male	2 Males	14/14	Children's Home x 2

### 6.2.3 Ethical Implications

Ethical consideration was applied to this study through the completion of a full research ethics application that included a risk assessment to determine any impact of participation to mentors. The risk assessment identified the need for confidentiality, informed consent and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. As outlined in Chapter 3.0, Section 3.2.6, appropriate measures were implemented to limit risks. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Ulster Research and Ethics Filter Committee on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011 (Appendix 2).

### 6.2.4 Procedural details

VOYPIC Development Workers and the Mentoring Manager informed all individuals mentoring young people who they knew to have a history of unauthorised absence from school about the research study. Mentors were provided with a detailed information sheet prepared by the researcher that included an invitation to take part. (Appendix 11). If mentors volunteered to participate arrangements were made for the researcher to meet with them at their local VOYPIC office for an interview. The meetings took place in a private room that was only used by researcher and participant. On attendance at the meeting the researcher explained the interview procedure and clarified any question that the participant had. The researcher provided two copies of the consent form for the participant to sign. The participant was given one copy of the consent form to retain for their records and the researcher retained the other copy (Appendix 11). After confirming that the participant was ready to begin, the researcher activated the audio-digital recorder. Using the interview schedule (Appendix 12) the interview commenced. After approximately one hour the interview ended and the researcher thanked the participant for their contribution to the study.

### 6.2.5 Data Analysis

As with the previous studies, each interview recording was transcribed verbatim. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was then conducted on each of the interview transcripts. TCA was chosen as a way of developing an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated which was the mentors' perspective of the issues their mentees encountered; theory is then generated from the data rather than pre-conceptualised by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998).

As outlined in Chapter 3.0, Section 3.3.1, TCA is described as a categorising strategy for qualitative data (ibid). TCA was conducted based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarisation of the data by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, noting down initial ideas, grouping interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating groups into potential themes, and then finally generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

Table 6.2 Description of themes generated

Themes and Sub-Themes	Description
<b><i>School refusal</i></b>  Sub-themes Resistance Control	Young people were described as refusing to attend school, which was demonstrated in their unauthorised absence. Participants' described the resistance young people expressed as emotionally charged, and that not attending school was the one area of their lives over which they could exert control. This was in response to feeling that other areas of their lives were beyond their control.
<b><i>Difficult inter-personal</i></b>	Participants identified young people as having difficult relationships with both peers and teachers at school. School peers were known to bully young people



<p><b><i>relationships at school</i></b></p> <p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Peers</p> <p>Teachers</p>	<p>because they were in care, and relationships with teachers were challenging due to a lack of understanding and emotional difficulties.</p>
<p><b><i>Moving placement</i></b></p> <p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Placement type</p> <p>Frequency</p>	<p>Moving care placement had a major impact on young people attending school, in terms of frequency and placement type. Some young people had several placement changes in a short space of time, with residential care having a negative impact due to the influence of other looked after young people's non-attendance, while foster carers could not enforce school attendance.</p>
<p><b><i>Parenting style</i></b></p> <p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Motivation</p> <p>Consequences</p>	<p>Participants expressed frustration at their perception that care givers were permissive in their approach to managing unauthorised absence, which they interpreted as a lack of interest in young people's educational needs. They felt no one was trying to motivate their mentee educationally and no consequence for non-attendance.</p>
<p><b><i>Mentoring can help</i></b></p> <p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Goal setting</p> <p>Relationships</p>	<p>The mentoring relationship was described by all participants as having a beneficial effect for mentees, even if it wasn't always apparent at the time.</p> <p>The goal setting methods used to address school attendance were helpful, while having an emotional relationship helped to build their young person's confidence and aspirations.</p>

## 6.3 Findings

### 6.3.1 Theme 1. School Refusal

Mentors described their young person's refusal to go to school as being emotionally charged conversations, with anger and resistance frequently expressed:

Participant 3b: *...it was just a complete arguing session to get her out to school...*

Participant 3c: *...he just refused to go...*

Participant 3g: *...the young person would've said you know I don't need to go...*

One mentor explained how he felt his mentee refused to go to school as a form of resistance because often for care experienced young people, their lives can feel beyond their control:

Participant 3d: *...it's just what he can control if he can go I'm not going to school and someone goes right okay and he gets his way cause he's no like decision making...*

### 6.3.2 Theme 2. Difficult inter-personal relationships at school

The relationships young people had with others they came into contact with at school were described as difficult, which contributed to recurrent non-attendance. Four participants described how their mentee was bullied by their peers at school:

Participant 3e: *...she was getting called names you know "you're a whore you're a slut ", and I think that put her off going to school she was getting bullied...*

Participant 3a: *...he was getting abuse from other people in the school they were bullying him and calling him stupid...he would've lost his temper and then got into fights...*

Participant 3g: *...my young person it worked out that the fact was he was being bullied...*

While bullying is a common experience for many children in NI schools, being in care was classified as being different and was often used by the bullies to target young people:

Participant 3a: *...he had told someone he knew in school a friend someone he confided in them and told them he was in care apparently they did not know beforehand so that wasn't an issue but then it transpired that he was getting difficulty....*

Participant 3d: *...some of the kids in the class pick up that it's not a normal living environment that he lives in or whatever and then you know what kids can be like...*

Participant 3g: *...he was being bullied because he was in care so sometimes that stigma is attached of being in care...*

Mentors also reported that poor relationships with teachers did little to encourage young people to attend school and they confirmed that young people believed their teachers did not view them in a positive way:

Participant 3b: *...she felt she was in a class where she felt they weren't really given enough attention...*

Participant 3e: *...I think that she always felt that she was the victim from the teachers the teachers didn't like her and singled her out and that was her idea anyway and she didn't like any of her teachers...*

### 6.3.3 Theme 3. Moving care placement

Some mentors stated that movement between care placements had influenced their young person's non-attendance at school. For example, one participant explained how their mentee had frequent placement changes that were not only generally disruptive but also meant the current placement was quite a distance from school:

Participant 3d: *...he was in a foster placement and then he was in a children's home and then he was in the mental health unit he was in there and then moved to a different children's home and like they've moved him again so he's kinda been moved all over the show...his school is quite far away from his placement and they didn't want him to move school but it's quite difficult...it's just his school is in A and he lives in B and that's a fair jaunt...you'd have to be up at 6...so I can't imagine getting him out of his bed at 6 in the morning...*

In contrast, another mentor described how moving placement meant that his mentee had to change schools which had a negative impact on him:

Participant 3c: *...he'd just moved into a home at the start...he was living with a foster family...he seemed to like school and then completely refused to go I don't know if it was the fear of starting a new school...he would talk about his old school that he went to sometimes and he would talk about his interactions with teachers particularly the teachers who he enjoyed being in their class and he'd talk about the teachers who were a laugh and good craic...*

In a further observation, a mentor explained how he saw a change in his mentee's behaviour which he attributed this to the influence of his peers when he was placed in a children's home:

Participant 3a: *...he was then moved from his foster care home...he went to a children's home and he met with a young girl there who was 14 a similar age to him and she was quite disruptive to say the least running away from the home drinking getting in trouble with the police and then he started doing the same things...*

### 6.3.6 Theme 4. Parenting style

Half of the mentors considered that there was no-one in the young person's life who really cared about their education and that this lack of significant adults who could motivate them to go to school or engage in education fuelled their non-attendance:

Participant 3e: *...the lack of interest in school was because there was no-one there to push her...*

Participant 3c: *...he wasn't going to school and what I found really hard to sort of comprehend was that there was no-one trying to make him go...*

Participant 3a: *...there was no-one there saying you have to do this do that you have to be here at a certain time there was no-one doing that...*

These mentors also stated that since there was no obvious consequence for non-attendance, going to school reduced even further in importance

Participant 3d: *...he's getting away with not going...*

One mentor attributed this to their mentee's placement in residential care, suggesting carers were not able or not permitted to put a consequence in place, while another felt the temporary nature of the foster placement for their young person meant that consequences could not be consistently enforced:

Participant 3g: *...a young person who is in residential care who decides to not get up and go to school in the morning there's no consequences for them you know they don't get grounded they can't be told off because residential staff's hands are tied...there's no consequences the young person still gets to go on activities their pocket money so there's no reason for them to go basically...*

Participant 3e: *...she was in foster care and foster care is so temporary it's not permanent for her she didn't know how long she was going to be there it is different like if you were in a more permanent set up then there would be more consequences but no not really not that I could see...*

### 6.3.5 Theme 5. Mentoring can help

All mentors described their relationship with their mentee as having had a positive impact. They agreed that the nature of these one to one relationships, where the mentor took an interest in their young persons' life showed that they genuinely cared; this helped young people realise they were valued and could achieve their goals:

Participant 3a: *...for once he was being given one on one attention and he was being complimented on everything he did he was told how good he was at things because he wasn't being told and he told me that he said no-one ever tells me I'm good at this I'm good at that and I said well I'm telling you you're good at it it's absolutely amazing you could see it taking a real impact on him and it also made me feel good it gave me a lot of satisfaction seeing him change to the point where he was starting to go to school on a regular basis....*

Mentors found the significance of the one to one relationship, allowed young people to have experiences that were just for them, and provide something that had often been missing from their lives:

Participant 3b: *...she needed someone to show her to give her some of her own attention without her carer being divided between everybody and I think just the fact that someone was shown her attendance someone just giving her her own attention seemed to have mattered a lot to her...I think she just needed that one person where she could say oh I have this mentor who is really who's just there for me so I think that there was a really big thing for her as well and to know that I wanted her to do well very much and that she'd see the benefits of it you know...*

The time spent together with each mentee created genuine opportunities for young people to talk about their circumstances and feelings at length, and for the mentor to visually and verbally demonstrate that what they said was important and that they were being heard:

Participant 3g: *...the young person I worked with felt that everyone was always on his case and no one was listening to him you know that kind of way I was seeing it from his point of view and asking him how he felt and what it is he wanted...*

Mentors believed the goal setting strategies focusing on attendance at school were helpful particularly when a series of small goals were identified. This incremental approach allowed young people to establish a series of gradual steps that were more realistic and achievable.

Participant 3b: *...one of the goals we talked about was her attendance and we put that as our number one goal and we put it to see if she could go from that meeting til our next meeting until her summer exams in June and she succeeded you know went right through and didn't miss it and each week it was constant praise and then she was coming to the meetings and she's still coming to the meetings and the first thing she'll say is "I haven't missed any days"...*

Participant 3g: *...I made small goals with him and said you know look I'm gonna set you a target this week I want you to get up at 12 o'clock and he said well why I've nothing to get up for and I said well if you get up at 12 o'clock I'll come over every single day and take you out for your breakfast you know you'll have something else to get up for and I will arrange for staff to make sure you have something to do directly after so you're not sitting about bored and he did that for about a week or 2 and again he would've lapsed in the third week but you said to him right ok last week didn't go too well let's start again and it was always trial and error with him you always had to go back again and whatever else and it worked... it worked pretty well...*

However, not all goal setting methods were effective, with some mentors describing less successful attempts which often did not work as targets were poorly defined or the young person remained resolutely disinterested:

Participant 3c: *...he was so reluctant to come to anything he was also reluctant to come to any goal setting we did manage to get him here once but the goal settings were quite he didn't buy into them at all and they were all quite vague...he didn't buy into the target setting...*

Participant 3d: *...one of his goals was to go to school more cause he kind of knows himself he should be he's not he doesn't not see the point of it he just doesn't want to go and like he'll lie through his teeth to me and say he's been cause he knows people want him to go and he doesn't want to disappoint people even though the carers are going "naw he hasn't been in 3 weeks"...*

Participant 3e: *...none of them have been met like doing homework and then she got out of school like half way through it so they weren't met...the goals in terms of the things that she really wanted to do but had never done they worked out but anything that she had to work hard at like stopping smoking there was issues that she was at risk of grooming and stuff they haven't been met because she's still meeting with the same sort of guys and putting herself in these positions...*

Interestingly, it was agreed the mentoring relationship could have a positive impact on the young people even when the goal setting in terms of school attendance had failed:

Participant 3c: *...he bought into it really well and I mean obviously there's always going to be a couple of issues when he didn't turn up but most of the time he did turn up and engaged well when he was out with me...*

Participant 3d: *...he's not engaging at all with like services here I can't get him to go out a lot but I go back every week and he looks like you're seriously back again it's like a genuine shock...*

Participant 3e: *...the girl I mentor does come to me with all her problems...but she's informed now and that's all you can do at the end of the day she has the information...*

On reflection, one mentor described the positive impact the mentoring had, even though he couldn't see it at the time:



Participant 3g: *...at the time of the end of the relationship I reflected back myself and thinking what good thing has come out of this relationship and at the time I couldn't think of anything and it wasn't til after 2 years I ran into him eh he's a big fella and I was looking up at him and was all what's the craic what are you doing now and he's doing everything we set out to do in the mentoring you know he's doing cheffing now he's started living on his own and he loves the course he's doing and he's going to be a qualified chef in the next 2 years so to me it must have worked somewhere...*

#### **6.4 Discussion**

The participants in this study revealed a wealth of insight into the lives of their mentee and, through their experiences working with a looked after young person, they have added further depth of understanding to the emotional and practical components of their lives that contributed to non-attendance at school. Mentors spent regular amounts of time with these young people, developing an emotional relationship based on respect and trust and it was through this that they were able to use strategies to focus on improving attendance.

For the first time throughout this research, young people were described as *refusing* to attend school and their non-attendance without permission was one manifestation of this refusal. This is a unique insight and an important finding. School refusal differs from unauthorised absence in that it can suggest high levels of anxiety in a young person in terms of their attendance (Kearney & Silverman, 1999). While it is not classified within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), school refusal is nonetheless identified as a symptom of anxiety-based disorders such as separation anxiety, generalised anxiety, panic disorder and social anxiety among children and young people (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Why looked after young people present with school refusal is a complex behaviour, based on a broad range of factors that could contribute to anxiety including pre-care and current care experiences. Mentors associated the bullying their mentee encountered in the school environment as a major reason for their refusal to

attend. The victimization that occurs as a result of bullying behaviours is known to contribute to feelings of low self-esteem and fear which both highly correlate with anxiety disorders (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003). Studies exploring the effects of bullying in schools report the intense fear victims experience in the presence of the perpetrator both of the threat or action of physical and psychological attack (Craig, 1998; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000). The response of many individuals exposed to these types of experiences and the associated anxiety, is to seek ways of avoiding them, so in cases of school refusal in this sample, young people may be refusing to attend in order to avoid the bullies which is an understandable reaction to this situation. Avoidance behaviours are a common response among those identified as having an anxiety disorder as a way of managing emotional distress and it makes sense that in order to protect or maintain wellbeing a situation or person would be avoided. However, avoidance behaviours are problematic as a long term strategy, particularly when they result in reinforcement of the source of the anxiety (Beck, Emery & Greenberg, 1985; Salkovskis, 1991) and if it means missing something important such as education (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). Sustained avoidance through non-attendance means that young people also miss out on opportunities to learn and develop socially and emotionally, which is of such fundamental importance to their development and psychological wellbeing, that it is enshrined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29 ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)).

It was interesting that one mentor described their mentee's school refusal as a response to feelings other aspects of their life are beyond their control. Many studies involving LACYP have identified their desire for more influence, choice and control as they navigate their care pathway (Happer, McCreddie & Aldgate, 2006; VOYPIC, 2013). The findings of this study also suggest difficult relationships with teachers may have contributed to anxiety particularly as mentees believed teachers were either too authoritarian in their approach, or they did not like them. Both of these scenarios are unproductive because they reinforced the young person's decision to not attend. The quality of the teacher / pupil relationship is an important predictor in educational outcomes. When viewed through the lens of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1960,) in the absence of a secure

attachment to a teacher, a young person can feel anxiety if they are suspicious of others, are unable to find comfort in relationships or generally feel unsafe in their environment. Pupils need to feel safe and secure to be best placed to learn (Parker & Levinson, 2018) and without these factors young people may struggle to focus or achieve educationally. This relationship is especially important for young people who are being bullied at school and its absence is likely to exacerbate fear and anxiety of the school environment.

Further compounding the issue of nonattendance was the impact of moving care placement. Frequent placement changes have been an enduring criticism of the care system for many decades (Bilson and Barker, 1995; Department of Health and Social Security, 1985; Kirby, 1994; McSherry, 2015; NICCY, 2016) and are sufficiently disruptive and distressing for young people they are recognised as an indicator for emotional harm (NICE, 2013). Even if circumstances in a current placement have broken down and moving is the best option, young people may still experience the effects of separation from carers, parents, siblings, peers, school and their wider community (Ward, 2011). Despite the recognition that placement instability is a key problem for LACYP, it continues to be the experience of many young people.

Mentors also viewed placement type as having a potentially detrimental impact on a young person's school attendance. Group residential settings where young people lived with other looked after peers seemed to be a significant influence on school attendance, particularly if they noticed others engaging in unauthorised absences. Residential care home placement is known to be the least preferred option by local authorities because those placed in these settings tend to have poorer educational and health outcomes (Care Matters, 2007; The Children's Society, 2015). However, in the absence of suitable foster care arrangements, sometimes this is the only option to ensure that at least some of the needs of young people are met. A significant issue that residential settings present is that young people coming from diverse difficult backgrounds and pre-care experiences are grouped together; often, this can serve to escalate existing problems and lead to the development of

further challenges. Young people are cared for by a team of professional caregivers and have a dedicated social worker within the residential unit and a social worker from their local authority. When a young person first moves to a residential unit - either upon entry to the care system or as the result of a move from a previous placement - they have usually experienced a period of difficulty or trauma for a variety of reasons which has resulted in separation from their family or carers (DHSSPS, 2016). Many formerly looked after children report feeling fearful when moving into a residential setting; there are lots of people to get to know, navigation of new rules and new relationships, alongside peers experiencing similar difficulties and having to come to terms with their own individual circumstances. For young people this can be a chaotic and distressing experience (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016; Ofsted, 2009). The mentors in this study highlighted the impact of peers living in residential units as negatively influencing their mentees' behaviour towards school attendance which they believed exacerbated existing difficulties. Research evidence of the effect of a child's peer group on their social and academic development (Johnson, 2000) indicates it is influential factor in school attendance (Trurjilo & Tanner, 2014). It would also be conceivable that young people living in group residential settings would experience the same peer influence that can happen at school along with the desire to fit in and be accepted socially, even if the outcome is negative behaviour.

Mentors identified the ways in which they perceived the management of nonattendance by care givers in both foster and residential placements, as unhelpful. They viewed these strategies as doing little to promote school attendance or motivate engagement in education. What mentors described was the parenting style of caregivers who look after young people on a day to day basis, and their perceptions that responses to nonattendance were permissive and uninvolved. It is not clear from these findings if these responses were due to a lack of disposition towards education or if these were a result of the level of pressure experienced by carers that mean education has a lower priority status. Research on the effect of parenting styles on children has made associations with a variety of child outcomes. In particular, parenting style has been found to predict child well-being in the

domains of social competence, academic performance, psychosocial development, and problem behaviour (Weiss & Schwarz, 1996). Parenting is a complex activity that includes many specific behaviours that work individually and together to influence child outcomes. Parenting style refers to a psychological construct describing strategies that parents use when raising their children. A leading theorist of parenting style was Diana Baumrind (1967) based on her research with pre-school children. She proposed three main styles of parenting. Permissive parenting describes a parent who makes few demands of their children, is often lenient and non-traditional with low expectations for behaviour having few rules that tend to be inconsistent. These parents rarely discipline their child and avoid confrontation often using bribery as a way to control their children's behaviour. Permissive parents are usually very loving and caring but can often be seen more like a friend than a parent. As there is a low level of demand or expectation placed on the children of permissive parents, they can often lack self-control or discipline which means they can be less academically motivated and behave disruptively at school due to the low expectations of behaviour at home (Maccoby, 1992). Children raised by permissive parents can lack self-discipline and as a result can struggle in social situations as they are too self-involved and demanding. They may be competent with inter-personal interaction but poorer with skills such as sharing. They can also be insecure due to the lack of guidance and the poor definition of boundaries (Baumrind, 1991). Research also suggests that children of permissive parents are more likely to engage in risk taking behaviours such as substance misuse and anti-social behaviour (Baumrind, 1991) while a more recent study found that teenagers of permissive parents were three times more likely to engage in heavy alcohol consumption (Bahr & Hoffmann, 2010). The authoritarian parent has high expectations of their children with strict rules that they expect to be followed without question. According to Baumrind (1967) these parents are obedience and status orientated, expect their orders to be obeyed and often use punishment rather than discipline without explanation or reasoning for their rules. Authoritarian parents often place high demands on their children with little warmth or nurturance. Preservation of order and traditional structure is highly valued while compromise is not encouraged

as this type of parent believes that their decision is the only option that their child should have. Authoritative parenting is described as democratic where the parent uses a child-centred approach. This type of parent encourages independence but will have expectations and consequences for behaviour using discipline in a fair and consistent manner. They listen to their children's thoughts, opinions and encourage discussion of options with warmth and nurturing. Children raised with this type of parenting are found to have good emotional control and self-regulation, higher self-esteem, good social skills with a strong belief in their abilities to learn new skills (Baumrind, 1991).

Uninvolved parenting (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) was later added to the parenting styles, this refers to a parent who is unresponsive to their child's needs. They are emotionally distant from their children showing little warmth or affection as well as providing little guidance or expectation for behaviour. The level of involvement tends to vary with some parents using basic rules while others can neglect or even reject their children. The uninvolved parent may intentionally avoid their children and typically has limited participation in their child's life. Research has found that children of uninvolved parenting generally perform poorly in every area of life, with these children displaying deficits in cognition, attachment; social and emotional skills (Santrock, 2007). Developmental psychologists generally identify authoritative parenting styles as the most beneficial to children. Many studies have reported the beneficial effect that authoritative parenting has on educational success. Steinberg, Elmen and Mounts, (1989) found that this parenting style was related to many parental behaviours and attitudes of high standards which contributed to positively affecting academic orientation and success including a strong work ethic, commitment to classroom activities, high aspirations for education, positive emotions in relation to education and educational self-conception, a commitment to spend time completing homework or studying and lower occurrences of school misconduct such as copying or cheating in exams or assignments.

Other studies have identified three specific characteristics of the authoritative parenting style that contribute to healthy psychological development and educational success which include acceptance

or warmth, behavioural supervision and strictness, and psychological autonomy granting or democracy (Steinberg et al., 1989). This type of parenting can have a positive effect on a child's academic progress when they are directly involved and supportive in school activities through their help with homework or assignments, through the encouragement of educational success and by attending school events such as parent teacher meetings (Steinberg et al., 1994). Authoritative parenting demonstrates the important relationship associated with parental involvement and specific motivational constructs of a child's ability in education. Parental involvement refers to providing their child with resources in the form of spending time with their child, taking an interest and being attentive to the child's needs as well as providing their child with emotional resources (Ratelle, Larose, Guay and Sene'cal, 2005). Parental involvement usually benefits students' learning and their achievements in education (Soucy and Larose, 2000). Another link that can explain the role of parental involvement and student motivation is that through their involvement parents demonstrate to their children the importance of education (Gonzalez-De Hass et al., 2005). Children become motivated when they see their parents take an active interest in their education so that when parents show enthusiasm for what their children are learning they are in effect providing a support system at home that reinforces the value of school. Marchant, Paulson and Rothlisberg, (2001) found that when students perceived their parents as valuing education and academic success, students were more motivated and perceived themselves as having higher levels of academic competence. Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch and Darling (1992) examined specific types of parental involvement such as helping with homework, attending school activities and monitoring of academic progress finding that parental involvement is most likely to benefit educational outcomes when it occurs within an authoritative parenting style typified by parental acceptance and warmth as well as behavioural supervision that still allows for a level of democracy and self-determination on the part of the child.

For LACYP it is important to remember the impact of those acting in a parental capacity and how this influences their educational progression. Managing unauthorised absence from school is complex

for carers because of the range of challenges that young people are experiencing in other areas of their lives. If non-attendance is due to an underlying anxiety disorder then therapeutic intervention is often required (Lyon & Cotlor, 2007). However based on the findings of this study it is worth considering if caregivers are in fact limited in their parenting style with children in care and how this can impact the quality of care they can provide. As corporate parents all those involved in a looked after young person's life should share the same principles they would want the same for their own biological children (Care Matters, 2009) yet this was not the perception of mentors in this study who perceived a disregard for education among carers. Some authors suggest this may be due to structural features of the care system and placement instability that contribute to the lower priority status given to education by social services (Berridge, 2007; Maxwell et al., 2006). In 2012, a report produced by the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW) highlighted that social workers spent less than a third of their working week with young people in their care, due to the extreme pressure on social workers as a result of increased demands on services and an overall reduction in administrative staff. This meant that time previously spent providing preventative and therapeutic support was outweighed by the growing number of referrals, cuts to services and increased bureaucracy associated with the social work profession. In 2014 UNISON publically appealed to the government to provide urgent funding to child protection services as social workers struggled to keep up with the demand. Budget cuts have led to social work shortages, and existing resources focusing on crisis management rather than early intervention. Additionally welfare cuts, and rising child poverty has meant social workers are under constant pressure to close cases and look for the cheapest placement options, rather than focus on what would be in the best interests of a child or young person. For LACYP, this can have serious and long lasting consequences if authorities are experiencing difficulties providing high-quality services that can consistently meet all development needs including education.

Mentors voiced frustration at the way in which not going to school was managed by caregivers and how this made their efforts to promote education more difficult. The frustration many participants



expressed was due to the emotional connection they had developed with their mentee. All reported the benefits for young people, even if the goal setting techniques used didn't succeed. Mentors described how they sought to engage with their young person over time and to demonstrate that they cared about their mentee's wellbeing. Mentors believed it was quality of the relationship that had a positive impact on young people, and research has shown this relationship can build much needed resilience among young people (Dubois & Neville, 1997). There is growing evidence that mentoring is of particular benefit for looked after young people not only in core areas such as education, but that the positive effects of the relationship can have a 'spill over' effect into other areas of their lives including, family, care setting, peers, school, workplace and leisure activities (Jones & Brown, 2011). This effect is thought to occur due to improved feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy and ability which the mentor validates through close contact with their mentee to provide positive, constructive and personal attention (Gilligan, 1998). Munson and McMillen (2008) describe the mentoring relationship between a non-parental carer and young person as having the potential to be life changing, suggesting this occurs through a range of mediating processes including changes to personal and social development, cognitive development and identity development. The findings from this study in relation to mentoring lends support to the growing evidence base that mentoring can make a positive contribution to the lives and outcomes of young people in care within and beyond education, this demonstrates the potential level of trust and openness that can develop, that allows healthy developmental processes to occur. It is helpful to remember the circumstances of the young people in this study as individual's experiencing or recently experiencing significant change, distress or chaotic circumstances. Through the opportunity to have a positive experience with an adult that helps them to learn and grow as individuals, this has the potential to a compensatory effect for past adversity that has led to or caused by events prompting admission to the care system (Gilligan, 1998). The time span of the mentoring project in this study was limited to one year and some authors suggest the time span of a mentoring relationship is correlated with increased positive outcomes (Munson & McMillen, 2008). This has been seen in naturally occurring

mentoring relationships not limited to a particular project, but stem from either existing relationships i.e. an older sibling or family member, social worker or education practitioner. It is evident that these relationships strengthen over time but with a limit of one year is this long enough to have a positive, sustained impact. Munson and McMillen (2008) report greater success in longer-term relationships. It can take time for change to occur within the mentoring relationship but this means that young people are better positioned to develop the resilience to overcome the challenges of their pre-care and care experiences, so that by the time they exit the care system they have the practical and emotional skills to make their own way in the world (Jones & Brown, 2011).

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the final study of this thesis, and has outlined the perspectives and experiences of a group of mentors who enter into a voluntary relationship with LACYP to focus on their education and school attendance issues. The mentors revealed the anxiety young people experienced in relation to attending school and difficulties service providers had in 'parenting' these young people. They attributed part of the problem to the parenting style of corporate parents and measures used by schools to manage unauthorised absence. They voiced considerable frustration at the competing approaches both used to address school attendance. The role of mentoring was demonstrated as having a positive impact on young people and mentors, through the emotional connection and friendship that evolved within their relationship. The mentors reported seeing an improvement in their young person's school attendance, interest in education and overall motivation, however this took time to develop. The following, final chapter of the thesis considers the collective findings of all three research studies, and discusses these in relation to the Ecological Systems Theory as outlined in Chapter 2.0, Section 2.5.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

## **7.0 Overview**

This chapter brings together the key findings from the thesis that provide insights into why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence from school among looked after young people in NI. The chapter returns to the original aim and objectives of the research and, in responding to these, summarises the main findings through the lens of the Ecological Systems Model (EST) as the framework in which to understand what they reveal about young people's educational experiences. A critical evaluation of the methodologies used and a reflective view of the research processes are also presented. In addition, the chapter critically considers the practical implications of the findings and identifies recommendations for policy and practice in both the Care and the Education systems. Suggestions for future research in this area are also identified.

### **7.1 Original Aim and Objectives**

With the numbers of children and young people admitted to the care system consistently increasing (DHSSPS, 2017) and overall outcomes for this group tending to be poorer than their peers it is important to consider what more can be done to prevent disadvantage and adversity continuing into adulthood. Educational outcomes have been highlighted as one area of concern due to lowered attainment and attendance at school (DHSSPS, 2017; Martin & Jackson, 2002). This factor requires specific focus because education offers hope for these children and young people as it has the potential to improve their life chances (Gallagher et al., 2004; Goddard, 2000; McClung & Gayle, 2010). Attending school should empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives (CCEA, 2007). It should also provide opportunities for individuals to achieve personal fulfilment and wellbeing through living a successful life, contributing to society, the economy and the environment ([www.ccea.uk](http://www.ccea.uk)). However for some LACYP, they are choosing not to attend school and ultimately miss out on these opportunities.

The Department for Education in Northern Ireland and the Health and Social Care Trusts have a legal obligation to ensure that the educational needs of a looked after child or young person are met, as outlined in the NI Curriculum (CCEA, 2007), however their poor school attendance rates and consistently lowered educational attainment continue to be problematic). These children and young people have been recorded as having higher than average absence rates from post primary school in NI, including unauthorised absence (DE, 2011; DHSSPS, 2017). Unauthorised absence is a concerning behaviour because it reduces opportunities to learn, and is associated with risk taking behaviours (Rivers, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2005). It was, therefore, important to examine this issue to understand what this behaviour reveals about their educational experiences, and to find ways of improving school attendance and the subsequent opportunities it can provide. Their care status means that these children and young people are already vulnerable, so where they are and what they are doing when not at school merits attention. Without suitable age appropriate adult supervision or support during school hours, the associated overall risks escalate and compound each other. It is essential that these authorities explore and seek to understand why school attendance is more difficult for LACYP, and how appropriate are the policies and strategies used to address their needs.

The key objectives of the research were to answer why there are higher rates of unauthorised absence among LACYP, and what does this tell us about their educational experiences. This included identifying any known or hitherto known contributing factors or influences. Secondly, the thesis sought to understand what their educational experiences have been like and how these have shaped their educational progress. Finally, the thesis explored what is either helpful or unhelpful in addressing attendance.

In order to answer these questions, three studies were designed to capture the perspectives of those who work in a professional capacity with these young people, and the views and experiences of young people themselves. Each study provided a unique contribution to existing knowledge and

literature; collectively the studies present a unique 360 degree perspective that can assist in the development of appropriate interventions to address this problem using an Ecological Systems Framework:

Study One: Perspectives of Service Providers

Study Two: Perspectives of Looked After Young People

Study Three: Perspectives of Mentors

## **7.2 Summary of research findings**

Overall, the findings from the three studies suggest that attending school is consistently problematic for young people due to aspects of the school and care environment as well as personal characteristics of the young people themselves. Given the complexities of these issues, it has been useful to determine the boundaries of the environments young people are situated within and how each interacts to compel the problem further. As described in the literature and policy review in Chapter 2.0, the lives of LACYP are exceptionally intricate. To achieve greater understanding of this phenomenon, Ecological Systems Theory was applied to the research to establish the multi-layered environments these young people inhabit and how these interact to lead to a pattern of non-attendance. By using the EST model, the findings of each study have revealed where difficulties with education can occur and what factors precipitate young people's unauthorised absence from school.

### **7.2.1 Microsystem**

At the centre of the model is the microsystem which represents the young person's characteristics and their most immediate relationships with others. For LACYP, their immediate relationships are common to all children, consisting of parents, siblings, peers (community and school) and teachers

and school staff. However, because of their looked after status, LACYP have additional relationships and interactions with social workers and carers from the HSCTs. Similar to the existing literature, characteristics of young people were described by service providers in Study One as manifesting in emotional and social functioning difficulties (Goodman et al., 2004; McDonald et al., 2011; Simkiss, 2012). These characteristics were explained as a consequence of, and response to, pre-care experiences including abuse and neglect that had resulted in psychological trauma (Dube et al., 2003). The effects of trauma in childhood can lead to the subsequent development of mental health difficulties such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, self-harm and alcohol / drug abuse. In a social context, emotional difficulties may mean young people struggle to make sense of their interactions with others especially if they have not had the opportunity to form healthy, secure relationships with primary caregivers (Ainsworth, 1978). This was evident in the difficulties young people had interacting with their peers because they struggled to make and maintain friendships, to develop trust and manage their emotions within friendships.

Further contributing to relationships with peers was the way peers interacted or responded to LACYP. Many of the participants described the stigma and bullying that young people experienced during interactions with their peers. Given the importance of social interactions from a developmental perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Buhs et al., 2006), as those which shape the child's perception of themselves and the world around them; for LACYP these difficult, persistent experiences only serve to further reduce their self-esteem and confidence. Additionally, all three studies highlighted problems with the teacher-young person relationship, with interactions between the two either lacking boundaries by probing too much information or featuring too much authority. In particular, the young people describe relationships with their teachers as one in which they were misunderstood, and perhaps even stigmatised due to the lack of knowledge among the teaching profession about the needs of cared for children and young people.

A striking characteristic of the looked after young people in this research was that they had clearly different priorities in comparison to most of their peers. These related to the upheaval of becoming looked after, maintaining family contact and moving placement within the care system. These priorities placed young people under considerable emotional pressure that distracted them from any consistent or meaningful engagement in education. Family of origin was identified by service providers as a potential contributor to negative perceptions of education, particularly if the young person came from a background where education was not valued and where parents had disengaged from education at an early age. Consistent with other authors (Triseliotis, 2010), this resulted in young people not developing intrinsic or extrinsic motivation associated with school and learning that all children need to progress academically (Steinburg et al., 1992; Quay & Harper, 2014).

### **7.2.2 Mesosystem**

Surrounding the young person is the mesosystem which represents the care system and the interactions that occur between them. Difficulties were apparent within the care system environment that both service providers and mentors identified as relating to placement instability, type of placement and how carers parented young people. Service providers in the education and voluntary sectors voiced their frustration with parenting/caregiving structure of the care system which they perceived to have adopted a passive approach to education generally and school attendance in particular. Equally, the mentors expressed frustration with caregivers in the Trusts; this was again based on their perception that young people were not being motivated to attend school, that unauthorised absence was not an issue and that there were no short or longer term consequences to this behaviour. When considering parenting in a traditional sense, it is often one or two people who have the responsibility of raising a child; by comparison, for many LACYP, their parents are the state and the responsibilities of parenting are shared amongst statutory authorities.



From a practical perspective, there can be a lot of people involved in a child's life and more so as length of time in care increases (Hunt et al., 2008; Jackson, 1987)). The statutory reviews that take place as part of the care planning for LACYP demonstrate how many parties can be involved in the parenting process. It is important, therefore, to consider how well parenting can be achieved in this circumstance, what parenting style can the state and those individuals working within it provide. The participants in this study suggest that the miss-match between corporate parenting and individual care is a significant factor in perpetuating non-attendance at school. Some insights can be gleaned from studies amongst parents who separate or divorce where disagreements can arise between both parties on the parenting styles of the other (Barker & Hoskins, 2017; Habibi, Hajiheydari & Darharaj, 2014). It raises an issue that requires investigation to consider how well corporate parents are able to collectively raise children in their care. There is a fundamental need for all service providers to work together as corporate parents because this will directly impact the quality of the care provided by the state; this should be consistent corporate parenting that holds high aspirations for LACYP as if they were their own biological children. This is embedded in policy and the intent is clear, but it is not evident in reality in this research. Importantly, this research highlights the need for input at a mesosystem level so that it can filter down to the microsystem to ensure LACYP receive the right support.

Other features of the care system were identified by mentors as negatively contributing to poor educational outcomes primarily due to frequent placement changes that resulted in changing school and placing young people under additional stress. Placement instability is not a new phenomenon, yet it continues to be a consistent challenge within the care system; it would be important that authorities focus on this issue and ask what more can be done to provide suitable, stable out of home alternatives. Placement stability is important because it creates opportunities for children and young people to develop secure relationships, which may take time when previous relationships have been characterised by adversity (Boddy, 2013). While placement stability requires careful assessment of a child's needs and subsequent care plan (DfE, 2014), social workers within the care

system need to have a range of placement options available to them that will best meet individual needs. The difficulty is that there is a lack of placement options in NI that inevitably contributes to the frequency of placement breakdowns. A report completed by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) (2014), highlights concerns regarding limited placement resources for LACYP, while in 2015, Barnardo's reported a shortfall of 200 foster placements in NI. Advertisements for foster carers are a common occurrence in NI media ([www.fosteringandadoption.hscni.net](http://www.fosteringandadoption.hscni.net) ; [www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk) )so it may be worthwhile to reconsider why there is an absence of suitable carers for these children and young people, and what more can HSCTs do to meet this principle need for those in their care. Placement type was described by service providers and mentors as having an impact on education; the negative effect of peer influence in residential settings could be problematic, but even foster placements that are deemed the more desirable of the two, were viewed as contributing to non-attendance especially when a young person was placed with foster carers on a short term basis. The parenting style of the care system was suggested to be passive in relation to education because corporate parents did not demonstrate the importance of education. By comparison, schools were described as using too much discipline through suspensions and expulsions that did little to improve attendance, which again highlights the incompatibility between authorities.

### **7.2.3 Exosystem**

The third layer within Ecological Systems Theory was the school environment which was highlighted by every participant, in all three studies, as being particularly problematic for young people. The findings suggested the school environment was the most dominant influencing factor in the decision young people took to not attend; because experiences of stigma, social rejection, victimisation and bullying created significant barriers with peers and teachers. The effects of these were reinforced by mentors in the third study who highlighted the anxiety young people felt in relation to attending

school. When they did attend it increased the emotional stress they were already experiencing due to their family / care circumstances, and was a source of additional harm. Young people understandably responded to the school environment by disengaging and physically taking themselves away from these difficulties. Given their pre-existing difficulties forming relationships and managing their personal circumstances, young people had exhausted their emotional resources to deal with experiences in the school environment. Attending school presented as an additional pressure in their already chaotic lives and one that they felt was best managed through avoidance. A central component of human development is learning to cope with psychological stress, however a child's ability to find coping strategies is largely influenced by what other resources are available to them, such as emotional support from parents or supportive social networks, that act as a buffer during times of stress (Compas, 1987).

Additionally, all the participants highlighted the unhelpful effect school disciplinary procedures had on attendance suggesting it had little effect or compounded the problem further. Given the reasons young people did not want to attend school, including the stigma associated with being looked after, this behaviour is not simply due to misbehaving but rather is an expression of how unhappy young people are. Young people recommended school based approaches to resolve the underlying issues by increasing awareness among teachers of issues that affect LACYP that can help them to understand and recognise the challenges that going to school presents. Perry (2016) in her Northern Ireland Assembly briefing on LACYP educational policy and practice, highlights the distinct lack of initial teacher education in NI that includes issues affecting looked after pupils:

**Stranmillis University College:** BEd programme and three post-graduate modules include teaching on a range of issues relating to looked after children.

**Mary's University College:** BEd students may opt to take a module on 'Educational Responses to Trauma' which includes looked after children; PGCE students study issues relating to LACYP within the child protection course.

**Queen's University Belfast:** Issues associated with looked after children are touched on under the themes of inclusion, pastoral care and child protection.

**University of Ulster:** Issues around looked after children are not specifically mentioned in teaching (NIA, 2014, p7).

Furthermore, by addressing the impact of school league tables that can pressurise schools to only focus on pupils who are academically achieving, and improve teacher understanding of the needs of disadvantaged pupils, may assist in changing the negative social perception and stigma of LACYP that has such a damaging effect on the self-worth and self-esteem of these children and young people. VOYPIC have made considerable contributions to raising the profile of LACYP in education and ensuring their voice is heard by policy makers i.e. VOYPICs 'Our Life in Care Survey' (2013) in which over 300 LACYP participated, who identified their desire to have a supportive educational environment.

#### **7.2.4 Macrosystem**

The macrosystem surrounding LACYP consists of the legal and policy contexts in which their care provisions are governed as outlined in Chapter 2.0, section 2.2.4; it is remote from the child but significantly influences how authorities manage their looked after status. In contrast to the perceived piecemeal provision in schools, the legal systems that govern both the care and education systems present with exceptionally comprehensive frameworks to guide how the state looks after those in its care and ensure their needs are met. Current legislation and policy recognises the whole child and specifies their fundamental right to education. Yet, in practice, these frameworks have not been evident in this thesis in reference to how corporate parents look after children and young people, and how schools accommodate their needs. In Study Two, young people described experiences in the school environment that should not have happened and that resulted in

additional trauma; these young people already had significant difficulties and should have been protected and supported in the holistic approach that policy advocates. Why this is the case needs further exploration, but existing literature indicates the increasing pressure and demands of large caseloads placed on social workers, and increasing bureaucracy and administrative duties directly reduces the support and interventions required, with some suggesting the social work profession in NI is in crisis (NIASW, 2012; UNISON, 2014).

### **7.2.5 Chronosystem**

The final system surrounding LACYP is the chronosystem that represents changes over time. Whilst the body of legislation and policy development indicate evident progress in the care system over time, the findings of this thesis suggest much more still needs to be done in order to enhance the potential of these children and young people to succeed despite adversity. The care system and education system need to work together to understand and address why the social contexts of attending school are problematic and consider ways to reduce the victimisation, bullying and isolation looked after young people can experience. It is ironic that the historical public outcry for authorities to intervene in cases of neglect and abuse, to protect children and young people, that these same children and young people would then be socially ostracised because they have become looked after. By addressing these problems, young people are more likely to want to go to school if they feel accepted and valued when they are there. Even in the presence of chaotic family circumstances, if young people felt that the school environment was a safe, enjoyable and stable place to be, this has the potential to build much needed resilience to overcome disadvantage (Gilligan, 2007).

### **7.3 Methodological Evaluation**

This thesis represents the first known examination of unauthorised absence from school among looked after young people in Northern Ireland. For this reason an exploratory design was developed to determine the boundaries and factors that contribute to this problem using the perspectives of service providers, looked after young people and mentors as a lens. The research questions were clearly designed and focused specifically on why unauthorised absence occurs. To answer the research questions and due to the exploratory nature of the topic, a qualitative methodology was used by interviewing relevant individuals who would be able to provide valuable insight, which also aided the development of the research. Interviewing was particularly valuable as it allowed the participants to guide the direction of the discussion rather than the researcher and, therefore, allowed for an organic presentation of data. Interviews were conducted by the same researcher and on a one to one basis to ensure consistency; this was also to permit participants to speak freely without the influence of others or worry that information provided could be discussed outside of the interview process. Overall, participants were able to detail the issues contributing to unauthorised absence from school through the use of this methodology, that provide a considerable contribution to the existing knowledge, primarily aimed at improving the educational experiences of LACYP. It was evident from the interviews that service providers and mentors were keen to share their views because they too had identified this was an issue for young people and wanted to find ways of improving their educational outcomes. In particular, the young people who participated provided a wealth of insight that has allowed the research to share their voice in a way that can be heard, explained and justified. By using three different participant groups it was possible to gather and present a holistic perspective of unauthorised absence, purposive sampling was the best way to identify participants because of their unique characteristics relevant to the topic, which fulfilled maximum variation. These are evidenced in the rich quality data provided, and the recurrent themes which had striking similarities across the three groups; equally data saturation was achieved through the combined participant sampling.

### 7.3.1 Limitations and challenges:

There were a number of methodological limitations and challenges within this research that require consideration. A common critique of qualitative methods is the role of the researcher and their ability to remain objective as the data collecting instrument, and throughout the subsequent analysis and presentation of findings; however, throughout this thesis a number of techniques including data triangulation, reflexivity and objectivity were used to limit this effect, as outlined in Chapter 3.0, section 3.2.7. The other key challenge of qualitative research is the generalisability of findings. Whilst the findings of this research cannot be generalised to the wider population, nonetheless, they do reveal key issues LACYP encounter that highlight the contribution of this research which is further strengthened in light of the dearth of existing knowledge on this group.

Some challenges were apparent in the participant recruitment process; the first arose while recruiting service providers for the first study when, due to significant time delays accessing HSCT and EA staff, it was not possible to include these individuals due to the additional time required to obtain permission and ethical approval for their participation. It is recognised that their contribution as primary corporate parents would have been very useful; it is also conceivable that they could have presented their perspective and the challenges they encounter in their role. The second challenge was evident in the low number of young people who took part in the Study Two. LACYP are a notoriously hard to reach group and this was reflected in the initial sample of eight young people who initially indicated their interest in participating. Unfortunately, the personal circumstances of four young people meant they had to withdraw prior to data collection leaving four participants. However, it is encouraging that these young people expressed an interest in taking part and this suggests they viewed the research in a positive way, and believed they had something they wanted to contribute. Other studies have also struggled to recruit LACYP (Kefalyew, 1996; Lipkin, 2016; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998) so it is important to respect the complex, traumatic experiences they have had and their desire for privacy. Heptinstall (2000) has highlighted the necessity for an

extended timeframe for recruitment and participation due to the emotional needs of LACYP and navigating the gatekeeping processes required to access them. Winter (2006) has suggested the best way to include LACYP is by the use of a participatory design, whereby they are actively involved in the development, application and analysis of research. Additionally, the reliability, validity, and the ethical acceptability, of research with this group can be augmented by using an approach which provides LACYP with control over the research process including a methodology that is compatible with their ways of seeing and understanding the world (Thomas, 2015).

#### **7.4 Reflective view of the research approach**

Qualitative research is often subject to criticisms due to the subjective nature of data interpretation, and researchers are strongly encouraged to reflect on the attributes they bring to the area of investigation. Prior to beginning the thesis, even before the original planning of the work, I was acutely aware that I would, in part, bring my own experiences of being a looked after child and that it was important to protect myself and my privacy and to monitor how my own experiences could impact my interpretation of the findings. Throughout the research, I was fortunate to be able to discuss and consider these issues with my supervisors / Chief Investigators. In addition, I used a reflective diary to record my thoughts and feelings throughout the research process. The only participants I shared my own care experience with were the young people in the Study Two because I recognised the significant effort of their participation and I wanted to demonstrate to them that I could empathise how their lives had been impacted, by both family circumstances and the care system. The decision not to share my background with the participants in Study One and Study Three was to minimise any bias in their responses to the interview questions; on reflection, I am aware that this may be due to my own perception that they might 'hold something back' in order to not offend or upset me personally. I was very encouraged by the passion and sensitivity shown by service providers and mentors, and their desire to improve the lives of care experienced young



people. VOYPIC deserve exceptional recognition for the work they do on a daily basis to challenge society's view of young people and how they challenge young people to be the best they can be, to not let difficult experiences hold them back and most importantly that they are valued.

### **7.5 Implications of the thesis**

There are several implications of this thesis that highlight the necessity of the care and education systems to review their policy and practise relating to the needs of LACYP, to understand why existing policy is not evident in the experiences of the participants in this research.

The findings indicated that in meeting emotional needs, young people were better positioned to engage in their education. The Mentoring Project provided by VOYPIC demonstrates how beneficial support of this nature can be because it allowed opportunities for young people to build a stable relationship with someone who valued them as individual's and who believed in their potential. This relationship should be celebrated and sustained because it builds the resilience needed for young people to succeed.

Current legislation provides educational support for care leavers until the age of 21 years or until 25 years if in further education (DHSSPS, 2017), however it may be helpful for this provision to be extended as suggested by the service providers. In light of disadvantage, some young people may not be able to engage in education while they recover from trauma. It may not be possible to do so until they experience sustained stability, however if appropriate policy was in place they could be given the option of a second chance at education. Many of these types of schemes are already known to be beneficial through focusing on academic, personal and social development, providing skills which can be used to gain employment or continue to further education, and offers additional sources of support and stability in early adult years (Busher, James & Piela, 2015; Gallagher, 2010; Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2005).

Finally, this research may assist in the understanding of other non-looked after school pupils, who also engage in unauthorised absence particularly those who experience abuse, neglect and rejection in their home environments. Most importantly this research indicates unauthorised absence from school is an expression of deep unhappiness, within and outside the school environment. This should trigger authorities to examine and intervene as a safeguarding requirement for all pupils.

## 7.6 Recommendations of the thesis

The findings of this thesis propose a number of recommendations for policy makers and practitioners working with LACYP in care and educational contexts:

**Microsystem:** A key issue identified by all participants were the experiences of young people in the school environment. In a social context, young people struggled with their relationships with peers and were subject to bullying and rejection. This thesis proposes that this should be the focus of initiatives that challenge the negative social perception of LACYP, and promotes understanding and inclusion.

**Mesosystem:** As with existing literature, this thesis echoes the challenges of placement instability and the quality of care provided by those acting in a parental capacity. Both act as predictive factors in the educational success for LACYP. This is a persisting problem that despite significant input from policy makers, academics and practitioners isn't changing. Undoubtedly this demonstrates how the care system is failing to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society.

**Exosystem:** Relationships with teachers were also highlighted as an area of difficulty for young people. All schools in NI receive additional funding when a looked after status is recorded on their census, which means schools have extra resources to meet the needs of looked after pupils. It's not

clear from the literature how this money is used but schools may benefit from an audit to determine the impact this extra funding has, and to draw comparisons between schools to promote best practise. It is not a statutory requirement for LACYP to have a Personal Education Plan in NI, yet the benefits are evident by providing a continuous record of their educational progress that follows the child even if they have to change school. This facilitates better collaborative input from the care and school systems and should become a legal requirement.

Training for teachers in NI that specifically focuses on the needs of LACYP is not compulsory. However it would greatly benefit teachers and pupils if this was a mandatory component of initial teacher education and ongoing professional development. This includes promoting better understanding of the issues and challenges these young people experience and how this impacts their educational progress. More training means teachers are better equipped to meet their educational needs. School policies to manage unauthorised absence through the use of suspension and expulsion methods are evidenced in this research as doing little to resolve the problem so it would be important for these procedures to be reviewed. New strategies need to focus on what this behaviour represents rather than viewing it as something that requires sanction.

**Macrosystem:** Challenges within the macrosystem do not relate to the quality of legislation and policy that governs the care of children and young people, but rather on how well it can be implemented by both the care and the education systems. This must be given appropriate attention by policy makers to ensure the benefit of such extensive guidance can be evidenced at a grassroots level.

**Chronosystem:** The history of the care system demonstrates that authorities have not always been able to protect and nurture the children in their care. While cases of institutional abuse are less likely to occur since the implementation of safeguarding measures, when using a holistic, whole child approach it is clear that both the care and the education systems still have a long way to go to

ensure every child in their care has the appropriate opportunities to succeed. Their future depends on it.

### **7.7 Suggestions for future research**

The findings of this thesis highlight a number of key areas that could benefit from additional research.

Firstly, given the sample limitations it would be useful to determine more fully the numbers of LACYP who have negative experiences in the school environment, the nature of these experiences and if there are any interventions that have been found to be particularly useful to address attendance that can be adopted by all schools who have looked after pupils. All of the participants in this research identified the need for emotional support inside and outside of school, a factor that is also detailed in existing literature and policy. However, it would be important to gain greater understanding about the challenges teachers, school staff and those in a corporate parenting capacity encounter when implementing this type of support.

Secondly, future studies could consider the social stigma associated with those in the care of the state, why this has occurred and what strategies could reduce prevailing stereotypes. Given the disadvantage that social stigma can place on looked after young people – which can extend into adulthood – steps to promote a positive understanding and acceptance of LACYP is essential.

Finally, mixed method quantitative and qualitative longitudinal studies that track the educational pathway of looked after young people would be useful to provide complementary evidence of the challenges within the care and education systems as identified in this research. As a disaggregated group in the Department for Education statistics, this could be pursued. These types of studies have the potential to identify good practice and learning for policy makers and professionals. This research has identified the need for policymakers and practitioners to revisit how their work impacts

young people at a grassroots level, longer-term studies are more likely to demonstrate what areas require focus for change.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

This thesis has provided a framework to understand unauthorised absence from school among looked after young people. This framework is useful for future exploration of this issue because it has identified the environments in which difficulties can occur and the contributing factors within these. It has also raised awareness of the needs of looked after young people, sets the context of their educational experiences, and compared these to current legislation and policy. Finally this thesis highlights the collective role of everyone involved in the lives of these young people and that resolving educational issues is a shared responsibility.

## Appendix 1

### Literature review search strategy and terms

Population	Factors of interest: School / Education
Looked after children (LAC)	School
Looked after young people (LACYF)	Education
Children in care	Attainment
Looked after pupils	Qualifications
Pupils in care	Unauthorised absence
Care leavers	Attendance
Children leaving care	Truancy
	Suspension
	Expulsion
	Teachers
	Census
Factors of interest: Care system	Factors of interest: Type of study
Social services	Quantitative
Care	Qualitative
Foster care	Mixed methods
Residential care	Longitudinal
Foster home	Intervention
Secure accommodation	Systematic review
Social workers	Thematic Content Analysis
Care staff	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Children's home	Interviews
Legislation	Ethics
Policy	Sampling
Statutory guidance	Case study
Safeguarding	
Public enquiry	
Placement	
Kinship care	
Factors of interest: Psychology	Factors of interest: Family of origin
Mental health	Socio-economic status
Emotional health	Employment
Behaviour disorder	Sibling
Attachment	Parent
Stress	Extended family
Coping	Family contact
Abuse	
Neglect	
Trauma	

**Electronic databases searched: (1960-2018)**

EBSCO

ERIC

Ovid

ProQuest

PsycINFO

PsycArticles

PubMed

**Key journals searched on line or hand searched:**

The Journal of Educational Research

The Journal of Educational Psychology

The British Journal of Social Work

Child and Family Social Work

The Journal of Social Work

The British Educational Research Journal

The Journal of Children's Services

## Appendix 2



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**Research Office**

Our Ref: NC:GOV

07 November 2011

Dr T Cassidy  
School of Psychology  
Room H159  
University of Ulster  
Coleraine

Dear Dr Cassidy

**Research Ethics Committee Application Number: REC/11/0337**

**Title: Looked after children in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Non-attendance**

Thank you for your recent response to matters raised by the committee. This has been considered and the decision of the committee is that the research should proceed.

Please complete and return the attached undertaking prior to commencing the research.

Please also note the additional documentation relating to research governance and indemnity matters, including the requirements placed upon you as Chief Investigator.

The committee's decision is valid for a period of three years from today's date (this means that the research should be completed by that date). If you require this period to be extended, please contact the Research Governance section.

Further details of the University's policy are available at [www.ulster.ac.uk/research/rg](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/rg) along with guidance notes, procedures, terms of reference and forms.

If you need any further information or clarification of any points, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nick Curry'.

Nick Curry  
Senior Administrative Officer  
Research Governance  
028 9036 6629  
[n.curry@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:n.curry@ulster.ac.uk)



## Appendix 3

### **Information Sheet: Study One**

My name is Emma O'Neill and I am a University of Ulster, PhD student based at the Coleraine Campus. For my thesis I am investigating why there are higher incidences of unauthorised absences from school among looked after children in Northern Ireland. I will be supervised during this research project by Dr Tony Cassidy, who is the Chief Investigator of this project.

Existing literature has gone to great lengths to understand why education for LAC is so problematic, yet the area of non-attendance at school including unauthorised absence or truancy remains largely under researched. Figures from the Department of Education Northern Ireland indicate that in the school year 2008/09 looked after pupils in both primary and post-primary schools show higher incidences of absence in comparison to their peers, half of which are unauthorised (DENI, 2010). These findings are consistent for previous years and suggest the need for further examination of this issue.

This study aims to explore:

Current experiences of working with a looked after child who has a history of unauthorised absence from school.

A professional service provider perspective of this issue.

As a service provider to looked after children who have a history of unauthorised absence from school, you are invited to participate in this study which will consist of a one hour recorded interview with me to discuss your experiences of this issue.

Interviews can take place at your place of work or at a location convenient to you on a date/time that is suitable for you. The interview will be relaxed and informal and is the only requirement of your participation.

All information will remain confidential and all participants will remain anonymous in the preceding report. No personal information will be recorded; interview recordings, transcripts and consent forms will be held on the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which the data will be destroyed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage of the research without having to state why.

If you have any queries or should you require further information at any stage please feel free to contact me or the Chief Investigator at:

[oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk](mailto:oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk)

[t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk)

**Appendix 4****Consent Form: Study One****Title of Project:**

Looked After Children in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Absence.

**Name of Researcher:**

Emma O'Neill

**Name of Chief Investigator:**

Dr Tony Cassidy

Please tick:

**I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.**

☐

**I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.**

☐

**I give permission for the researchers to record the interview and I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence on the Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which it will be destroyed.**

☐

**I understand that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law).**

☐

## Appendix 5

### Interview Schedule: Study One

**Participant Identification Name:**

Firstly I would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project; I greatly appreciate your contribution. As you are aware I am investigating why there are higher incidences of unauthorised absence from school among looked after children.

I would like to start by asking you if you could tell me about your role as a service provider for looked after children.

Could you tell me about your experiences of working with a looked after child who was having difficulty attending or remaining in school?

What was helpful in that situation?

What was unhelpful?

## Appendix 6

### **Information Sheet: Study Two**

My name is Emma O'Neill and I am a student based at the University of Ulster. As part of my studies I am carrying out a research project exploring why some looked after children don't always go to school. This is sometimes known as 'skipping' or 'mitching' school. Very little is known about this and I would be really interested to hear what your experiences have been like.

### **How do you take part?**

If you would be interested in taking part I can meet with you for one hour at VOYPIC on a day and time that suits you best. I would like to record our discussion and your project worker can meet with us too if you would like them to. Your project worker will also be available at any stage before, during or after we meet to provide you with support. If you are under the age of 18, your legal guardian will also have to agree for you to take part and sign a consent form.

### **What happens to the information you share?**

You do not have to talk about anything that you are not comfortable sharing and we can stop at any stage. Everything you tell me will remain confidential unless it could indicate that you or someone else is at risk. If that is the case I will have to share this with your Project Worker who will discuss this with you further.

The information that you and other young people share will be used to write a report. You will remain anonymous in the report and no personal information will be recorded; recordings, transcripts and consent forms will be held on the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years and will then be destroyed.

### **And if you change your mind...**

You don't have to take part at any stage if you don't want to and even if you do take part but decide later that you don't want me to use what you have shared then just let your Project Worker know and I won't use it. You don't have to give a reason not to take part.

If you have any questions at any stage please feel free to contact myself or Dr Tony Cassidy who is supervising this project:

Emma O'Neill: [oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk](mailto:oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk)

Dr Tony Cassidy: [t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk)

## Appendix 7

**Assent Form: Study Two****Title of Project:****Looked After Children in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Non-Attendance.****Name of Researcher: Emma O'Neill****Name of Chief Investigator: Dr Tony Cassidy****Please tick:**

**I understand that my parents/guardians have given permission for me to take part in a research project that is exploring why some looked after children don't always go to school which is sometimes known as 'mitching' or 'skipping' school.**

☐

**I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.**

☐

**I would like to take part and understand that I can stop at any stage without having to give a reason without my rights being affected in any way.**

☐

**I understand that the researchers will record the interview and hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence on the Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which it will be destroyed.**

☐

**I understand that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law).**

☐

**Appendix 8****Consent Form: Study Two****Title of Project:**

Looked After Children in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Non-Attendance.

**Name of Researcher:** Emma O'Neill

**Name of Chief Investigator:** Dr Tony Cassidy

**I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.**

**I understand that the young person's participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without their rights being affected in any way.**

**I give permission for the researchers to record the interview and I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence on the Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which it will be destroyed.**

**I understand that the young person cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law).**

**Signature of legal guardian (if under 18):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 9****Interview Schedule: Study Two****Participant Identification Name:**

I would like to begin by thanking you for agreeing to take part in this research project and I greatly appreciate your contribution. As you are aware I am investigating why there are higher incidences of unauthorised absence from school among looked after children.

I would like to start by asking you if you could tell me what your experiences of attending school have been like.

Prompts: Different schools, teachers, friends, classwork, homework

Could you tell me about your experiences of not attending or remaining in school?

Prompts: Where would you go? How would you spend your time?

Has anything been useful in helping you to attend school?

Has anything been unhelpful?

## Appendix 10

### **Information Sheet: Study Three**

My name is Emma O'Neill and I am a University of Ulster, PhD student based at the Coleraine Campus. For my thesis I am investigating why there are higher incidences of unauthorised absences from school among looked after children in Northern Ireland. I will be supervised during this research by Dr Tony Cassidy, who is the Chief Investigator of this project.

Existing literature has gone to great lengths to understand why education for LAC is so problematic, yet the area of non-attendance at school including unauthorised absence or truancy remains largely under researched. Figures from the Department of Education Northern Ireland indicate that in the school year 2008/09 looked after pupils in both primary and post-primary schools show higher incidences of absence in comparison to their peers, half of which are unauthorised (DENI, 2010). These findings are consistent for previous years and suggest the need for further examination of this issue.

This study aims to explore:

Current experiences of mentoring a looked after young person who has a history of unauthorised absence from school.

A mentor's perspective of this issue.

As a mentor of a currently looked after young person, who has a history of unauthorised absence from school, you are invited to participate in this study which will consist of a one hour recorded interview with me to discuss your experiences of this issue.

Interviews will take place at the VOYPIC premises most convenient to you on a date/time that is suitable for you. The interview will be relaxed and informal and is the only requirement of your participation.

All information will remain confidential and all participants will remain anonymous in the preceding report. No personal information will be recorded; interview recordings, transcripts and consent forms will be held on the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which the data will be destroyed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage of the research without having to state why.

If you have any queries or should you require further information at any stage please feel free to contact me or the Chief Investigator at:

[oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk](mailto:oneill-e6@email.ulster.ac.uk)

[t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:t.cassidy@ulster.ac.uk)



**Appendix 11****Consent Form: Study Three****Title of Project:**

Looked After Children in Northern Ireland: Education, School and Unauthorised Non-Attendance.

**Name of Researcher:**

Emma O'Neill

**Name of Chief Investigator:**

Dr Tony Cassidy

Please tick:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.

☐

I give permission for the researchers to record the interview and I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence on the Coleraine Campus of the University of Ulster for 6 years after which it will be destroyed.

☐

I understand that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law).

☐

**Appendix 12****Interview Schedule: Study Three****Participant Identification Name:**

I would like to begin by thanking you for agreeing to take part in this research project and to tell you that I greatly appreciate your contribution. As you are aware I am investigating why there are higher incidences of unauthorised absence from school among looked after children.

I would like to start by asking you if you could tell me about your role as a mentor with VOYPIC?

Could you tell me about your experiences of mentoring a young person who has a history of unauthorised absence from school?

What have you found to be helpful for this young person to attend school?

Has anything been unhelpful?

## **Appendix 13**

### **Additional Legislation, Policy and Guidance**

#### **Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order (2007)**

The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order (2007) sets out guidance on how to prevent unsuitable adults from working with children. It places an obligation on any organisation working with children and young people to recruit suitably screened and vetted adults to care for them and to develop clear policies to reduce or prevent the risk of harm. Whilst there is no specific reference to children cared for by the local Health and Social Care Trusts, the Order does indicate that Trusts and other authorities must carry out suitable checks on staff that come into contact with children to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

#### **Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) (2011)**

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) was established to ensure the implementation of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order (2007). The role of the SBNI is to develop policies and procedures to improve how different agencies work in partnership to protect those in their care ([www.safeguardingni.org](http://www.safeguardingni.org)). The Board includes representatives from Health and Social Care Trusts, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland including youth justice, education authorities, district councils and the NSPCC.

#### **Protecting Looked After Children (2006)**

This practitioner guidance was developed by the HSCB to facilitate the protection and safeguarding of children and young people who are cared for by authorities in NI. It highlights that the needs of the child or young person are central to all planning processes and that unnecessary duplication that

subjects young people to different types of care meetings should be minimised. It also outlines guidance for comprehensive planning should incorporate safeguarding methods to lessen feelings of confusion for children and young people, identify ways to strengthen the planning process; and clarify actions to be taken by multi-disciplinary teams.

### **Minimum Standards for Children's Homes (2014)**

This guidance sets out the quality of service provision for those accommodated in children's homes and specifies 23 standards that authorities must demonstrate in the provision of residential placements:

Engagement, Participation and Involvement

Promoting a Positive Identity and Potential

Individualised Care and Support

Living in a Supportive Home

Safeguarding Children and Young People

Children and Young People Missing from Care

Promoting Good Health and Wellbeing

Leisure Activities

Citizenship and Participation in Community Life

Promoting Educational Achievement

Promoting and Supporting Contact with family

Providing a Suitable Physical Environment

Preparing for Commencing and Leaving a Placement

Looked After Children (LAC) Reviews

Promoting Independence, Moves to Adulthood and Leaving Care

Statement of Purpose and Children and Young Peoples Guide

Governance of residential units

Staffing of residential units

Management of Records

Short Break Care

Secure Accommodation

Complaints

Safe and Healthy Working Practices

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